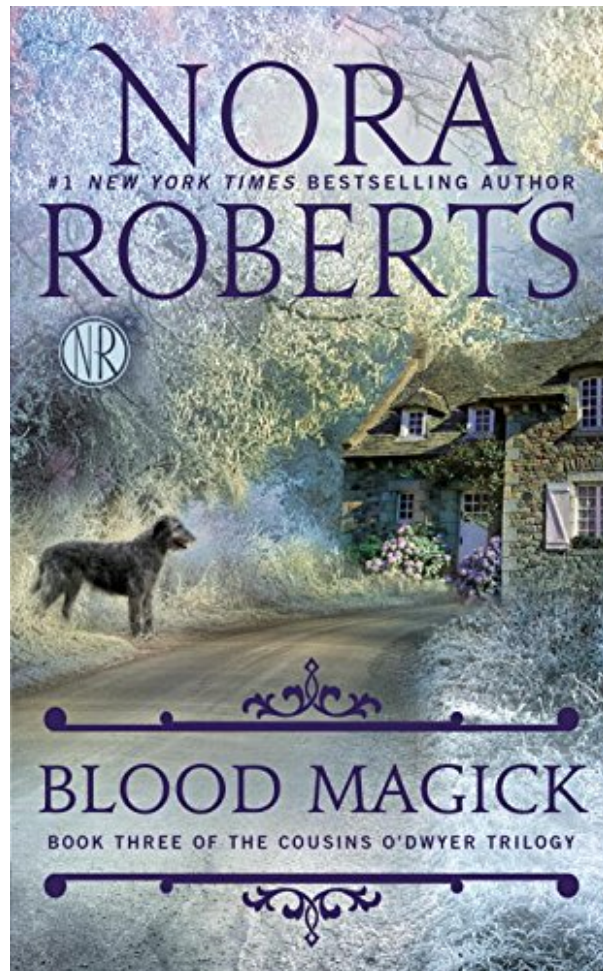
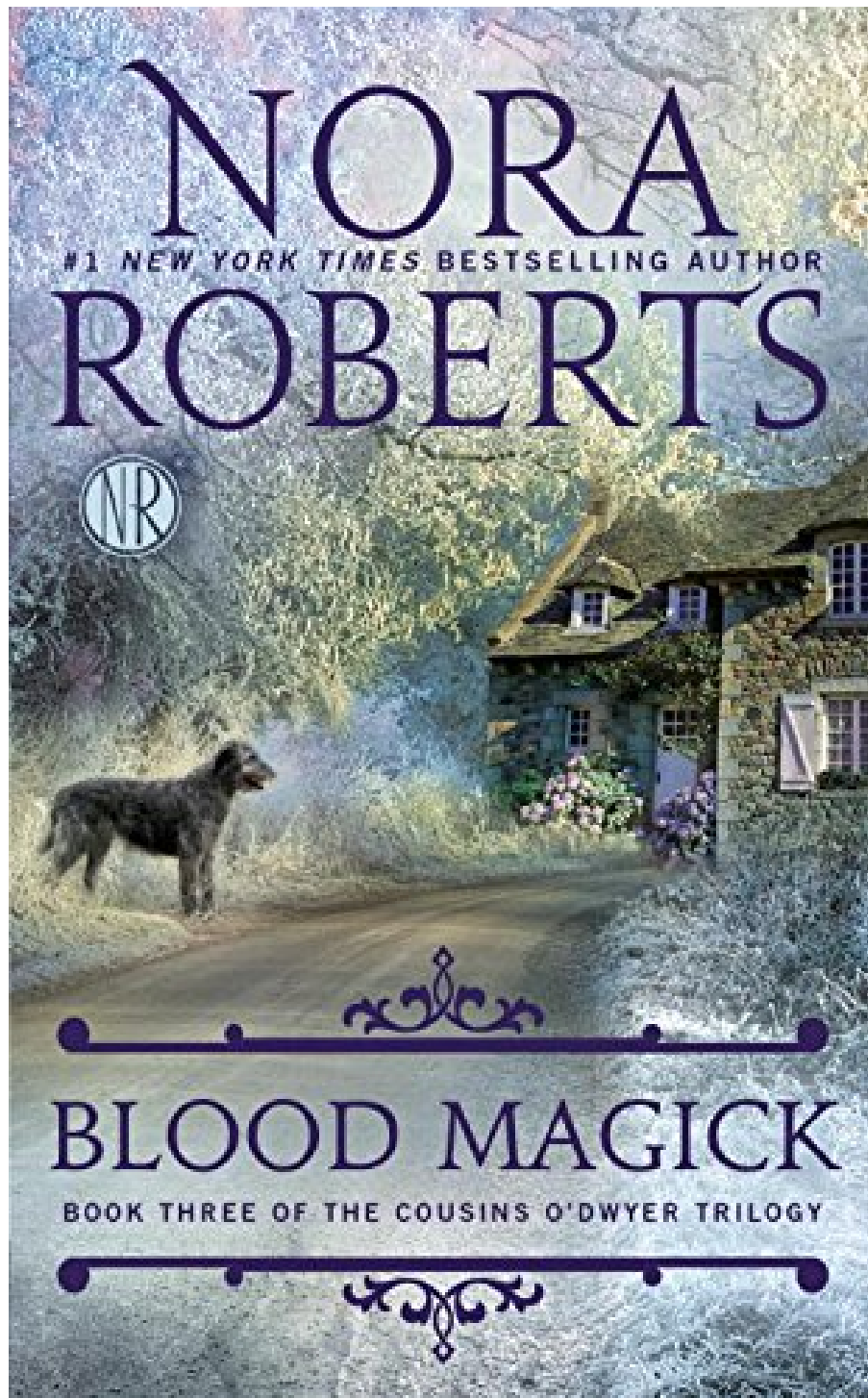


BLOOD MAGICK (THE COUSINS O'DWYER TRILOGY) BY NORA ROBERTS



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Review

"America's favorite writer."—The New Yorker

"When it comes to compelling, entertaining tales, Roberts is peerless...This is a quintessential Roberts story filled with friendship, passion, loyalty and undying love."—RT Book Reviews

From the Trade Paperback edition.

About the Author

Nora Roberts is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of more than 200 novels. She is also the author of the bestselling In Death series written under the pen name J. D. Robb. There are more than 500 million copies of her books in print.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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1

Summer 1276

ON A BRIGHT DAY AS SUMMER FADED, BRANNAUGH gathered herbs, flowers, foliage, all for salves and potions and teas. They came to her, neighbors, travelers, for their hopes and healings. They came to her, the Dark Witch, as once they'd come to her mother, with aches in body, in heart, in spirit, and paid with coin or service or trade.

So she and her brother, her sister, had built their lives in Clare, so far from their home in Mayo. Far from the cabin in the woods where they had lived, where their mother had died.

So she had built her life, more contented, more joyful than she'd believed possible since that terrible day their mother had given them all but the dregs of her own power, had sent them away to be safe as she sacrificed herself.

All grief, Brannaugh thought now, all duty and fear as she'd done what was asked of her, as she'd led her younger brother and little sister away from home.

They'd left love, childhood, and all innocence behind.

Long years. The first few spent, as their mother had bid, with their cousin and her man—safe, tended, welcomed. But the time had come, as time does, to leave that nest, to embrace who and what they were, and would ever be.

The Dark Witches three.

Their duty, their purpose above all else? To destroy Cabhan, the dark sorcerer, the murderer of their father, Daithi the brave, of their mother, Sorcha. Cabhan, who had somehow survived the spell the dying Sorcha had cast.

But on such a bright day in summer's end, it all seemed so far away—the terrors of that last winter, the blood and death of that last spring.

Here, in the home she'd made, the air smelled of the rosemary in her basket, of the roses planted by her husband on the birth of their first child. The clouds puffed white as lambs across the blue meadow of the sky, and the woods, the little fields they'd cleared, as green as emeralds.

Her son, not yet three years, sat in a patch of sun and banged on the little drum his father had made him. He sang and hooted and beat with such joyous innocence her eyes burned from the love.

Her daughter, barely a year, slept clutching her favored rag doll while guarded by Kathel, their faithful hound.

And another son stirred and kicked in her womb.

From where she stood she could see the clearing, and the little cabin she, Eamon, and Teagan had built near to eight years before. Children, she thought now. They'd been but children who could not embrace childhood.

They lived there still, close. Eamon the loyal, so strong and true. Teagan, so kind and fair. So happy now, Brannaugh thought, and Teagan so in love with the man she'd married in the spring.

All so peaceful, she thought, despite Brin's banging and hooting. The cabin, the trees, the green hills with their dots of sheep, the gardens, the bright blue sky.

And it would have to end. It would have to end soon.

The time was coming—she felt it as sure as she felt the babe's kicks in her womb. The bright days would give way to the dark. The peace would end in blood and battle.

She touched the amulet with its symbol of a hound. The protection her mother had conjured with blood magicks. Soon, she thought, all too soon now, she would need that protection again.

She pressed a hand to the small of her back as it ached a bit, and saw her man riding toward home.

Eoghan, so handsome, so hers. Eyes as green as the hills, hair a raven's wing that curled to his shoulders. He rode tall and straight and easy on the sturdy chestnut mare, his voice lifted—as often it was—in song.

By the gods, he made her smile, he made her heart lift like a bird on the wing. She, who had been so sure there could be no love for her, no family but her blood, no life but her purpose, had fallen deeper than oceans for Eoghan of Clare.

Brin leaped up, began to run as fast as his little legs could manage, all the while calling.

“Da, Da, Da!”

Eoghan leaned down, scooped the boy up in the saddle. The laugh, the man's, the boy's mixed, flew toward her. Her eyes stung yet again. In that moment, she would have given all of her power, every drop given her, to spare them what was to come.

The baby she'd named for her mother whimpered, and Kathel stirred his old bones to let out a soft woof.

“I hear her.” Brannaugh set down her basket, moved over to lift her waking daughter, snuggled her in with kisses as Eoghan rode up beside her.

“Look here, would you, what I found on the road. Some little lost gypsy.”

“Ah well, I suppose we should keep him. It may be he'll clean up fine, then we can sell him at the market.”

“He might fetch us a good price.” Eoghan kissed the top of his giggling son's head. “Off you go, lad.”

“Ride, Da!” Brin turned his head, beseeched with big dark eyes. “Please! Ride!”

“A quick one, then I want me tea.” He winked at Brannaugh before setting off in a gallop that had the boy shouting with delight.

Brannaugh picked up her basket, shifted young Sorcha on her hip. “Come, old friend,” she said to Kathel. “It's time for your tonic.”

She moved to the pretty cottage Eoghan with his clever hands and strong back had built. Inside, she stirred the fire, settled her daughter, started the tea.

Stroking Kathel, she doused him with the tonic she'd conjured to keep him healthy and clear-eyed. Her guide, her heart, she thought, she could stretch his life a few years more. And would know when the time came to let him go.

But not yet, no, not yet.

She set out honey cakes, some jam, and had the tea ready when Eoghan and Brin came in, hand in hand.

“Well now, this is fine.”

He scrubbed Brin's head, leaned down to kiss Brannaugh, lingered over it as he always did.

"You're home early," she began, then her mother's eye caught her son reaching for a cake. "Wash those hands first, my boy, then you'll sit like a gentleman for your tea."

"They're not dirty, Ma." He held them out.

Brannaugh just lifted her eyebrows at the grubby little hands. "Wash. The both of you."

"There's no arguing with women," Eoghan told Brin. "It's a lesson you'll learn. I finished the shed for the widow O'Brian. It's God's truth her boy is useless as teats on a billy goat, and wandered off to his own devices. The job went quicker without him."

He spoke of his work as he helped his son dry his hands, spoke of work to come as he swung his daughter up, set her to squealing with delight.

"You're the joy in this house," she murmured. "You're the light of it."

He gave her a quiet look, set the baby down again. "You're the heart of it. Sit down, off your feet awhile. Have your tea."

He waited. Oh, she knew him for the most patient of men. Or the most stubborn, for one was often the same as the other, at least wrapped inside the like of her Eoghan.

So when the chores were finished, and supper done, when the children tucked up for the night, he took her hand.

"Will you walk out with me, lovely Brannaugh? For it's a fine night."

How often, she wondered, had he said those words to her when he wooed her—when she tried flicking him away like a gnat in the air?

Now, she simply got her shawl—a favorite Teagan had made her—wrapped it around her shoulders. She glanced at Kathel lying by the fire.

Watch the babes for me, she told him, and let Eoghan draw her out into the cool, damp night.

"Rain's coming," she said. "Before morning."

"Then we're lucky, aren't we, to have the night." He laid a hand over her belly. "All's well?"

"It is. He's a busy little man, always on the move. Much like his father."

"We're well set, Brannaugh. We could pay for a bit of help."

She slanted him a look. "Do you have complaints about the state of the house, the children, the food on the table?"

"I don't have a one, not for a single thing. I watched my mother work herself to bones." As he spoke he rubbed the small of her back, as if he knew of the small, nagging ache there. "I wouldn't have it of you, aghra."

“I’m well, I promise you.”

“Why are you sad?”

“I’m not.” A lie, she realized, and she never lied to him. “A little. Carrying babies makes a woman a bit daft from time to time, as you should know. Didn’t I weep buckets when carrying Brin when you brought in the cradle you’d made? Wept as if the world was ending.”

“From joy. This isn’t joy.”

“There is joy. Only today I stood here, looking at our children, feeling the next move in me, thinking of you, and of the life we have. Such joy, Eoghan. How many times did I say no to you when you asked me to be yours?”

“Once was too many.”

She laughed, though the tears rose up in her throat. “But you would ask again, and again. You wooed me with song and story, with wildflowers. Still, I told you I would be no man’s wife.”

“None but mine.”

“None but yours.”

She breathed in the night, the scent of the gardens, the forest, the hills. She breathed in what had become home, knowing she would leave it for the home of childhood, and for destiny.

“You knew what I was, what I am. And still, you wanted me—not the power, but me.”

Knowing that meant all the world to her, and knowing it had opened the heart she’d determined to keep locked.

“And when I could no longer stop myself from loving you, I told you all there is, all of it, refusing you again. But you asked again. Do you remember what you said to me?”

“I’ll say it to you again.” He turned to her, took her hands as he had on the day years before. “You’re mine, and I am yours. All that you are, I’ll take. All that I am, I’ll give. I’ll be with you, Brannaugh, Dark Witch of Mayo, through fire and flood, through joy and grief, through battle and through peace. Look in my heart, for you have that power. Look in me, and know love.”

“And I did. And I do. Eoghan.” She pressed against him, burrowed into him. “There is such joy.”

But she wept.

He stroked, soothed, then eased her away to see her face in the pale moonlight. “We must go back. Go back to Mayo.”

“Soon. Soon. I’m sorry—”

“No.” He touched his lips to hers, stilled her words. “You will not say so to me. Did you not hear my words?”

“How could I know? Even when you spoke them, when I felt them capture my heart, how could I know I

would feel like this? I would wish with all I am to stay, just stay. To be here with you, to leave all the rest behind and away. And I can't. I can't give us that. Eoghan, our children."

"Nothing will touch them." Again he laid a hand on her belly. "Nothing and no one. I swear it."

"You must swear it, for when the time comes I must leave them and face Cabhan with my brother and sister."

"And with me." He gripped her shoulders as fire and fierceness lit his eyes. "Whatever you face, I face."

"You must swear." Gently she drew his hands back down to her belly where their son kicked. "Our children, Eoghan, you must swear to protect them above all. You and Teagan's man must protect them against Cabhan. I could never do what I must do unless I know their father and their uncle guard and protect them. As you love me, Eoghan, swear it."

"I would give my life for you." He rested his brow on hers, and she felt his struggle—man, husband, father. "I swear to you, I would give my life for our children. I will swear to protect them."

"I am blessed in you." She lifted his hands from her belly to her lips. "Blessed in you. You would not ask me to stay?"

"All that you are," he reminded her. "You took an oath, and that oath is mine as well. I am with you, mo chroi."

"You are the light in me." On a sigh, she rested her head on his shoulder. "The light that shines in our children."

She would use all she was to protect that light, all that came from it, and at last, at last, vanquish the dark.

• • •

SHE BIDED, TAKING EACH DAY, HOLDING IT CLOSE. WHEN HER children rested, when the one inside her insisted she rest as well, she sat by the fire with her mother's spell book. Studied, added her own spells, her own words and thoughts. This, she knew, she would pass down as she passed the amulet. To her children, and to the child who came from her who would carry the purpose of the Dark Witch should she and Eamon, Teagan fail.

Their mother had sworn they—or their blood—would destroy Cabhan. She had seen, with her own eyes, one of their blood from another time, had spoken to him. And she dreamed of another, a woman with her name, who wore the amulet she wore now, who was, as she was, one of three.

Sorcha's three would have children, and they would have children in turn. So the legacy would continue, and the purpose with it, until it was done. She would not, could not, turn away from it.

She would not, could not, turn away from the stirrings in her own blood as summer drew down.

But she had children to tend, a home to tend in turn, animals to feed and care for, a garden to harvest, the little goat to milk. Neighbors and travelers to heal and help.

And magicks, bright, bright magicks, to preserve.

So with her children napping—and oh, Brin had put up a battle heroic against closing his eyes—she stepped

outside for a breath.

And saw her sister, her bright hair braided down her back, walking up the path with a basket.

“You must have heard me wishing for your company, for I’m after some conversation with someone more than two years of age.”

“I’ve brown bread, for I baked more than enough. And I was yearning for you as well.”

“We’ll have some now, as I’m hungry every minute of every day.” Laughing, Brannaugh opened her arms to her sister.

Teagan, so pretty with her hair like sunlight, her eyes like the bluebells their mother had prized.

Brannaugh gathered her close—then immediately drew her back again.

“You’re with child!”

“And you couldn’t give me the chance to say so to you myself?” Glowing, beaming, Teagan grabbed hold for another strong embrace. “I was only just sure of it this morning. I waked, and I knew there was life in me. I haven’t told Gealbhan, for I needed first to tell you. And to be sure of it, absolutely sure. Now I am. I’m babbling like a brook. I can’t stop.”

“Teagan.” Brannaugh’s eyes welled as she kissed her sister’s cheeks, as she remembered the little girl who’d wept on that dark morning so long ago. “Blessed be, deirfiúr bheag. Come inside. I’ll make you some tea, something good for you and the life in you.”

“I want to tell Gealbhan,” she said as she went in with Brannaugh, took off her shawl. “By the little stream where he first kissed me. And then tell Eamon he’ll again be an uncle. I want music and happy voices. Will you and Eoghan bring the children this evening?”

“We will, of course, we will. We’ll have music and happy voices.”

“I miss Ma. Oh, it’s foolish, I know, but I want to tell her. I want to tell Da. I’m holding a life inside me, one that came from them. Was it so with you?”

“Aye, each time. When Brin came, and then my own Sorcha, I saw her for a moment, just for a moment. I felt her, and Da as well. I felt them there when my babes loosed their first cry. There was joy in that, Teagan, and sorrow. And then . . .”

“Tell me.”

Her gray eyes full of that joy, that sorrow, Brannaugh folded her hands over the child within her. “The love is so fierce, so full. That life that you hold, not in your womb, but in your arms? The love that comes over you? You think you know, then you do, and what you thought you knew is pale and weak against what is. I know what she felt for us now. What she and Da felt for us. You’ll know it.”

“Can it be more than this?” Teagan pressed a hand to her middle. “It feels so huge already.”

“It can. It will.” Brannaugh looked out at the trees, at the rioting gardens. And her eyes went to smoke.

“This son in you, he will not be the one, though he’ll be strong and quick to power. Nor will the son that

comes from you after him. The daughter, the third, she is the next. She will be your one of the three. Fair like you, kind in her heart, quick in her mind. You will call her Ciara. One day she will wear the sign our mother made for you.”

Suddenly light-headed, Brannaugh sat. Teagan rushed over to her.

“I’m well; I’m fine. It came over me so quick I wasn’t ready. I’m a bit slower these days.” She patted Teagan’s hand.

“I never looked. I didn’t think to.”

“Why should you think to? You’ve a right simply to be happy. I wouldn’t have spoiled that for all the worlds.”

“You haven’t. How could you spoil anything by telling me I’ll have a son, and another, and a daughter? No, sit as you are. I’ll finish the tea.”

They both glanced toward the door as it opened.

“Sure he has the nose for fresh bread, has Eamon,” Teagan said as their brother walked in with his brown hair tousled, as always, around a heartbreakingly handsome face.

With a grin he sniffed the air like a hound. “I’ve a nose, for certain, but didn’t need it to make my way here. You’ve enough light swirling around the place to turn up the moon. If you’re after doing a spell so bright, you might’ve told me.”

“We weren’t conjuring. Only talking. We’re having a bit of a céili at the cabin this evening. And you can keep Brannaugh company when I leave, so I can have time to tell Gealbhan he’s to be a father.”

“As there’s bread fresh, I can— A father is it?” Eamon’s bold blue eyes filled with delight. “There’s some happy news.” He plucked Teagan off her feet, gave her a swing, then another when she laughed. He set her down in a chair, kissed her, then grinned at Brannaugh. “I’d do the same with you, but it’s like to break my back, as you’re big as a mountain.”

“Don’t think you’ll be adding my jam to that bread.”

“A beautiful mountain. One who’s already given me a handsome nephew and a charming niece.”

“That might get you a dollop.”

“Gealbhan will be overjoyed.” Gently, as he was always gentle with Teagan, he brushed his fingers down her cheek. “You’re well then, are you, Teagan?”

“I feel more than wonderful. I’m likely to cook a feast, which will suit you, won’t it?”

“It will, aye, it will.”

“And you need to be finding the woman to suit you,” Teagan added, “for you’d make a fine father.”

“I’m more than fine with the two of you providing the children so I can be the happy uncle.”

“She’s hair like fire, eyes like the sea in storms, and a shimmer of power of her own.” Brannaugh sat back,

rubbing a hand over the mound of her belly. “It comes in waves these days. Some from him, I’m thinking—he’s impatient.” Then she smiled. “It’s good seeing the woman who’d take you, Eamon. Not just for a tumble, but for the fall.”

“I’m not after a woman. Or not one in particular.”

Teagan reached out, laid a hand on his. “You think, and always have, you’re not to have a woman, a wife, as you’ve sisters to protect. You’re wrong, and always have been. We are three, Eamon, and both of us as able as you. When you love, you’ll have no say in it.”

“Don’t be arguing with a woman who carries a child, especially a witch who does,” Brannaugh said lightly. “I never looked for love, but it found me. Teagan waited for it, and it found her. You can run from it, mo dearthair. But find you it will.

“When we go home.” Her eyes filled again. “Ah, curse it, I’m watering up every time I take a breath it seems. This you have to look to, Teagan. The moods come and go as they will.”

“You felt it as well.” Now Eamon laid a hand on Brannaugh’s so the three were joined. “We’re going home, and soon.”

“At the next moon. We must leave on the next full moon.”

“I hoped it would wait,” Teagan murmured. “I hoped it would wait until you’re finished birthing, though I knew in my head and my heart it would not wait.”

“I will birth this son in Mayo. This child will be born at home. And yet . . . This is home as well. Not for you,” she said to Eamon. “You’ve waited, you’ve bided, you’ve stayed, but your heart, your mind, your spirit is ever there.”

“We were told we would go home again. So I waited. The three, the three that came from us. They wait as well.” Eamon ran his fingers over the blue stone he wore around his neck. “We’ll see them again.”

“I dream of them,” Brannaugh said. “Of the one who shares my name, and the others as well. They fought and they failed.”

“They will fight again,” Teagan said.

“They gave him pain.” A fierce light came into Eamon’s eyes. “He bled, as he bled when the woman named Meara, the one who came with Connor of the three, struck him with her sword.”

“He bled,” Brannaugh agreed. “And he healed. He gathers again. He pulls in power from the dark. I can’t see where, how, but feel only. I can’t see if we will change what’s to come, if we can and will end him. But I see them, and know if we cannot, they will fight again.”

“So we go home, and find the way. So they who come from us won’t fight alone.”

Brannaugh thought of her children, sleeping upstairs. Safe, innocent still. And the children of her children’s children, in another time, in Mayo. Neither safe, she thought, nor innocent.

“We will find the way. We will go home. But tonight, for tonight, we’ll feast. We’ll have music. And we three will give thanks to all who came before us for the light. For the lives,” she said, with a hand light on his sister’s belly, and one on her own.

“And tomorrow.” Eamon stood. “We begin to end what took the lives of our father, of our mother.”

“Will you bide with Brannaugh? I would speak with Gealbhan now.”

“Give him only the joy today.” Brannaugh rose with her sister. “Tomorrow is soon enough for the rest. Take today for joy alone, for time is so short.”

“I will.” She kissed her sister, her brother. “Eoghan must bring his harp.”

“Be sure he will. We’ll fill the wood with music and send it flying over the hills.”

She sat again when Teagan left, and Eamon nudged her tea toward her. “Drink it. You’re pale.”

“A bit tired. Eoghan knows. I’ve talked with him, and he’s ready to leave—leave all he built here. I never thought it would be hard to go back. Never knew I would be torn in two ways.”

“Gealbhan’s brothers will tend the land here, for you and for Teagan.”

“Aye, and it’s a comfort. Not for you, the land here it’s never been for you.” Here again was sorrow and joy mixed into one. “You will stay in Mayo, whatever comes. I can’t see what we will do, Eoghan and I, the children. But Teagan will come back here, that I see clear. This is her place now.”

“It is,” he agreed. “She will ever be a dark witch of Mayo, but her home and heart are for Clare.”

“How will it be for us, Eamon, not to be together as we have been all our lives?”

His eyes, the wild blue of their father’s, looked deep into hers. “A distance in space means nothing. We are always together.”

“I’m weepy and foolish, and I dislike it very much. I hope this mood is a brief one or I might curse myself.”

“Well, you were given to tempers and sharp words toward the end of carrying young Sorcha. It may be I prefer the weeping.”

“I don’t, that’s for certain.” She drank the tea, knowing it would settle her. “I’ll add a bit more to the tonic I give Kathel and Alastar, for the journey. Roibeard does well without it yet. He’s strong.”

“He’s hunting now,” Eamon said of his hawk. “He goes farther each time. He goes north now, every day north. He knows, as we do, we’ll travel soon.”

“We will send word ahead. We will be welcome at Ashford Castle. The children of Sorcha and Daithi. The Dark Witches will be made welcome.”

“I’ll see to that.” He sat back with his own tea, smiled at her. “Hair like fire, is it?”

As he’d wanted, she laughed. “Oh, and you’ll be struck dumb and half blind, I promise you, when you meet.”

“Not I, my darling. Not I.”

FOR THE CHILDREN IT WAS AN ADVENTURE. THE IDEA OF a long journey, of the traveling to a new place—with the prize of a castle at the end of it, had Brin especially eager to go, to begin.

While Brannaugh packed what they'd need, she thought again of that long-ago morning, rushing to do her mother's bidding, packing all she was told to pack. So urgent, she thought now, so final. And that last look at her mother, burning with the power left in her, outside the cabin in the woods.

Now she packed to go back, a duty, a destiny she'd always accepted. Eagerly wished for—until the birth of her first child, until that swamping flood of love for the boy who even now raced about all but feverish in his excitement.

But she had a task yet to face here.

She gathered what she needed—bowl, candle, book, the herbs and stones. And with a glance at her little boy, felt both pride and regret.

"It is time for him, for this," she told Eoghan.

Understanding, he kissed her forehead. "I'll take Sorcha up. It's time she was abed."

Nodding, she turned to Brin, called him.

"I'm not tired. Why can't we leave now and sleep under the stars?"

"We leave on the morrow, but first there are things we must do, you and I."

She sat, opened her arms. "First, come sit with me. My boy," she murmured, when he crawled onto her lap. "My heart. You know what I am."

"Ma," he said and cuddled into her.

"I am, but you know, as I've never hidden it from you, what I am besides. Dark witch, keeper of magicks, daughter of Sorcha and Daithi. This is my blood. This is your blood as well. See the candle?"

"You made the candle. Ma's make the candles and bake the cakes, and Da's ride the horses."

"Is that the way of it?" She laughed, and decided she'd let him have that illusion for a little while more. "Well, it's true enough I made the candle. See the wick, Brin? The wick is cold and without light. See the candle, Brin, see the wick. See the light and flame, the tiny flame, and the heat, the light to be. You have the light in you, the flame in you. See the wick, Brin."

She crooned it to him, over and over, felt his energy begin to settle, his thoughts begin to join with her.

"The light is power. The power is light. In you, of you, through you. Your blood, my blood, our blood, your light, my light, our light. Feel what lives in you, what waits in you. See the wick, it waits for your light. For your power. Bring it. Let it rise, slow, slow, gentle and clean. Reach for it, for it belongs to you. Reach, touch, rise. Bring the light."

The wick sparked, died away, sparked again, then burned true.

Brannaugh pressed a kiss to the top of his head. There, she thought, there, the first learned. And her boy would never be just a child again.

Joy and sorrow, forever entwined.

“That is well done.”

He turned his face up, smiled at her. “Can I do another?”

“Aye,” she said, kissed him again. “But heed me now, and well, for there is more to learn, more to know. And the first you must know, must heed, must vow is you harm none with what you are, what you have. Your gift, Brin? An’ it harm none. Swear this to me, to yourself, to all who’ve come before, all who will come after.”

She lifted her athame, used it on her palm. “A blood oath we make. Mother to son, son to mother, witch to witch.”

Solemn-eyed, he held out his hand to her, blinked at the quick pain when she nicked it.

“An’ it harm none,” he said when she took his hand, mixed her blood with his.

“An’ it harm none,” she repeated, then gathered him close, kissed the little hurt, healed it. “Now, you may do another candle. And after, together, we will make charms, for protection. For you, for your sister, for your father.”

“What of you, Ma?”

She touched her pendant. “I have what I need.”

• • •

IN THE MORNING MISTS, SHE CLIMBED ONTO THE WAGON, her little girl bundled at her side. She looked at her boy, so flushed with delight in the saddle in front of his father. She looked at her sister, fair and quiet astride Alastar; her brother, their grandfather’s sword at his side, tall and straight on the horse he called Mithra. And Gealbhan steady and waiting on the pretty mare Alastar had sired three summers before.

She clucked to Gealbhan’s old plow horse, and with Brin letting out a whoop, began. She looked back once, just once at the house she’d come to love, asked herself if she would ever see it again.

Then, she looked ahead.

A healer found welcome wherever she went—as did a harpist. Though the baby heavy in her belly was often restless, she and her family found shelter and hospitality along the wild way.

Eoghan made music, she or Teagan or Eamon offered salves or potions to the ailing or the injured. Gealbhan offered his strong back and calloused hands.

One fine night they slept under the stars as Brin so wished, and there was comfort in knowing the hound, the hawk, the horse guarded what was hers.

They met no trouble along the way, but then she knew the word had gone about. The Dark Witches, all three, journeyed through Clare and on to Galway.

“The word would reach Cabhan as well,” Eamon said as they paused in their travels to rest the horses, to let the children run free for a time.

She sat between him and Teagan while Gealbhan and Eoghan watered the horses and Eamon dropped a line into the water.

“We’re stronger than we were,” Teagan reminded him. “We journeyed south as children. We go north children no more.”

“He worries.” Brannaugh stroked her belly. “As you and I carry more than we did.”

“I don’t doubt your power or your will.”

“And still you worry.”

“I wonder if it must be now,” Eamon admitted, “even knowing it must be now. I feel it as both of you, and yet would be easier if there was time for both of you to have proper lyings-in before we face what we must face.”

“What’s meant is meant, but in truth I’m glad we’ll break our journey for a day or so with our cousins. And by all the gods I’ll be happy to have a day off that bloody wagon.”

“I’m dreaming of Ailish’s honey cakes, for no one has a finer hand with them.”

“Dreaming with his belly,” Teagan said.

“A man needs to eat. Hah!” He pulled up the line, and the wriggling fish who’d taken the hook. “And so we will.”

“You’ll need more than one,” Brannaugh said, and reminded them all of those same words their mother spoke on a fine and happy day on the river at home.

They left the rugged wilds of Clare, pushed by fierce winds, sudden driving rains. They rode through the green hills of Galway, by fields of bleating sheep, by cottages where smoke puffed from chimneys. Roibeard winged ahead, under and through layers of clouds that turned the sky into a soft gray sea.

The children napped in the wagon, tucked in among the bundles, so Kathel sat beside Brannaugh, ever alert.

“There are more cottages than I remember.” Teagan rode beside her on the tireless Alastar.

“The years pass.”

“It’s good land here—I can all but hear Gealbhan thinking it.”

“Would you plant yourself here then? Does it speak to you?”

“It does. But so does our cabin in the woods in Clare. And still, the closer we come to home, the more I ache for it. We had to put that aside for so long, all of us, but now . . . Do you feel it, Brannaugh? That call to home?”

“Aye.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Aye. Of what’s to come, but more of failing.”

“We won’t.” At Brannaugh’s sharp look, Teagan shook her head. “No, I’ve had no vision, but only a certainty. One that grows stronger as we come closer to home. We won’t fail, for light will always beat the dark, though it take a thousand years.”

“You sound like her,” Brannaugh murmured. “Like our mother.”

“She’s in all of us, so we won’t fail. Oh, look, Brannaugh! That tree there with the twisted branches. It’s the very one Eamon told our cousin Mabh came to life each full moon, to scare her. We’re nearly to Ailish’s farm. We’re all but there.”

“Go on, ride ahead.”

Her face lit so she might’ve been a child again, Teagan tossed back her head and laughed. “So I will.”

She rode to her husband, let out a fresh laugh, then set off in a gallop. Beside Brannaugh, Kathel whined, quivered.

“Go on then.” Brannaugh gave him a stroke.

He leaped out of the wagon, raced behind the horse with the hawk flying above them.

It was a homecoming, for they’d lived on the farm for five years. Brannaugh found it as tidy as ever, with new outbuildings, a new paddock where young horses danced.

She saw a young boy with bright hair all but wrapped around Kathel. And knew when the boy smiled at her, he was Lughaidh, the youngest and last of her cousin’s brood.

Ailish herself rushed over to the wagon. She’d grown a bit rounder, and streaks of gray touched her own fair hair. But her eyes were as lively and young as ever.

“Brannaugh! Oh look at our Brannaugh! Seamus, come over and help your cousin down from the wagon.”

“I’m fine.” Brannaugh clambered down herself, embraced her cousin. “Oh, oh, it does my heart good to see you again.”

“And mine, seeing you. Oh, you’re a beauty, as ever. So like your mother. And here’s our Eamon, so handsome. My cousins, three, come back as you said you would. I’ve sent the twins off to get Bardan from the field, and Seamus, you run over and tell Mabh her cousins are here.”

Teary-eyed, she embraced Brannaugh again. “Mabh and her man have their own cottage, just across the way. She’s near ready to birth her first. I’m to be a granny! Oh, I can’t stop my tongue from wagging. It’s Eoghan, aye? And Teagan’s Gealbhan. Welcome, welcome all of you. But where are your children?”

“Asleep in the wagon.”

Nothing would do but for Ailish to gather them up, to ply them with the honey cakes Eamon remembered so fondly. Then Conall, who’d been but a babe in arms when last she’d seen him, took her children off to see a new litter of puppies.

“They’ll be fine, my word on it,” Ailish said as she poured out tea. “He’s a good lad, is Conall—one you helped bring into the world. We’ll let the men see to the horses and that, and you’ll both take your ease awhile.”

“Praise be.” Brannaugh sipped the tea, let it and the fire warm her, soothe her. “I’m sitting in a chair that’s not moving.”

“Eat. You’ve another in you who needs the food as well.”

“I’m starving all the day and half the night. Teagan’s not as hungry—yet. But she will be.”

“Oh, are you carrying?” Delight glowed on her face as Ailish stopped her fussing with tea, laid her hands over her own heart. “My sweet little Teagan, to be a mother. The years, where do they go? You were but a babe yourself. Will you stay? Will you stay until your time comes?” she asked Brannaugh. “It’s still a distance to Mayo, and you’re close. I can see you’re close.”

“A day or two only, and so grateful for it. The babe will be born in Mayo. It’s meant. It’s what must be.”

“Must it?” Ailish gripped Brannaugh’s hand, then Teagan’s in turn. “Must it? You’ve made your lives in Clare. You’re women, mothers. Must you go back to the dark that waits?”

“We’re women, and mothers, and more. We can turn our back on none of it. But don’t fret, cousin. Don’t think of it. We have today, with tea and cakes and family.”

“We will come back again.” When they looked at her, Teagan pressed a hand to her heart. “I feel it so strong. We will come back again. Believe that. Believe in us. I think faith only makes us stronger.”

“If that’s so, you’ll have all of mine.”

They had music and feasting and family. And for a night and a day peace. Still Brannaugh found herself restless. Though her man slept in the bed Ailish had provided them, she sat by the fire.

Ailish came in, wearing her night-robcs and a thick shawl.

“You need some of the tea you always made for me when I was so close to the end, and the babe so heavy in me I couldn’t sleep.”

“I look for her in the fire and smoke,” Brannaugh murmured. “I can’t help the looking, I miss her so. More as we near home. I miss my father; it’s an ache. But my mother is a kind of grieving that won’t end.”

“I know it.” Ailish sat beside her. “Does she come to you?”

“In dreams. There are moments, but only moments. I long to hear her voice, to have her tell me I’m doing right. That I’m doing what she’d want of me.”

“Oh, my love, you are. You are. Do you remember the day you left us?”

“I do. I hurt you by leaving.”

“Leaving always hurts, but it was what was right—I’ve come to know it. Before you left you told me of Lughaidh, the babe I carried. You said he must be the last, for neither I nor a babe would live through another birthing. And you gave me a potion to drink, every moon until the bottle was empty. So there would be no more children for me. It grieved me.”

“I know.” And knew it more poignantly now that she had her own children. “You are the best of mothers, and were one to me.”

“I would not have lived to see my children grown, to see my oldest girl ripe with her own child. To see, as you told me, Lughaidh, so bright and sweet, with a voice—as you said—like an angel.”

Nodding, Ailish studied the fire in turn, as if seeing that day again in the smoke and flame. “You laid protection over me and mine, gave me the years I might not have had. You are what she would want. Even as it grieves me that you will go, you will face Cabhan, I know you must. Never doubt she is proud of you. Never doubt, Brannaugh.”

“You comfort me, Ailish.”

“I will have faith, as Teagan asked. Every night I will light a candle. I will light it with the little magick I have so that it shines for you, for Teagan, for Eamon.”

“I know you fear the power.”

“It’s my blood as well. You are mine as you were hers. This I will do, every sunset, and in the small light I’ll put my faith. Know it burns for you and yours. Know that, and be safe.”

“We will come back. In that I will have faith. We will come back, and you will hold the child now inside me.”

• • •

THEY JOURNEYED ON, WITH A LITTLE SPOTTED PUP GIVEN the children with much ceremony, and with promises for a longer visit when they returned.

The air grew colder, the wind brisk.

More than once she heard Cabhan’s voice, sly and seductive, trailing on that wind.

I wait.

She would see Teagan look out over the hills, or Eamon rubbing his fingers over his pendant—and know they heard as well.

When the hawk veered off, and Alastar strained to follow, Kathel leaped out of the wagon, trotted off on a fork in the road.

“It’s not the way.” Eoghan pulled his horse up by the wagon. “We would make Ashford by tomorrow, but that is not the way.”

“No, not the way to Ashford, but the way we must go. Trust the guides, Eoghan. There’s something we must do first. I feel it.”

Eamon drew up on the other side. “Near home,” he said. “All but near enough to taste. But we’re called.”

“Aye, we’re called. So we answer.” She reached out, touched her husband’s arm. “We must.”

“Then we will.”

She didn’t know the way, yet she did. With her mind linked with the hound’s she knew the road, the turns, the hills. And oh, she felt him reaching out, that darkness, hungry and eager to take what she was, and more.

The hazy sun slid down toward the western hills, but still they rode. Her back ached from the hours in the wagon, and a thirst rose up in her. But they rode.

She saw the shadow of it in the oncoming dark—the rise of it with fields around. A place of worship, she thought, she could feel that.

And a place of power.

She stopped the wagon, breathed the air.

“He can’t get through. It’s too strong for him to push through.”

“Something here,” Eamon murmured.

“Something bright,” Teagan said. “Strong and bright. And old.”

“Before us.” Grateful for the help, Brannaugh let her husband lift her from the wagon. “Before our mother. Before any time we know.”

“A church.” Gealbhan reached up to lift Teagan from the saddle. “But no one’s here.”

“They’re here.” Weary, Teagan leaned against him. “Those who came before us, those who sanctified this ground. They will not let him pass. This is a holy place.”

“Tonight, this is ours.” Brannaugh stepped forward, lifted her hands. “Gods of light, goddesses bright, we call to you across the night. By the power you have given, by the purpose we are driven, we seek your blessing. A night within your walls before whatever fates befall, this respite, this resting. We are Sorcha’s three. Dark witches come to thee. By thy will, so mote it be.”

Light bloomed like sun, shining through the windows, the doors that opened with a wind like breath. And warmth poured out.

“We are welcome here.” Smiling, she lifted her daughter, and all the fatigue from the long journey fell away. “We are welcome.”

Brannaugh settled the children to sleep on pallets she made on the floor of the church. And was grateful to find both of them too weary to whine or argue, for her momentary energy already flagged.

“Do you hear them?” Eamon whispered.

“Even I hear them.” Eoghan scanned the church, the stone walls, the wooden seats. “They sing.”

“Aye.” Gealbhan picked up the pup to soothe it. “Soft, lovely. As angels or gods might sing. This is a holy place.”

“It offers more than sanctuary for the night.” A hand pressed to her back, Brannaugh rose. “It offers the blessing, and the light. We were called by those who’ve come before us, to this place, on this night.”

Teagan touched her fingers lightly, reverently, to the altar. “Built by a king for a kindness given. A promise kept. Built here near a pilgrim’s walk. This abbey called Ballintubber.”

She lifted her hands, smiled. “This much I see.” She turned to her husband. “Aye, this is a holy place, and

we'll seek the blessing of those who called us."

"Like the king," Brannaugh said, "we have a promise to keep. Eoghan, my love, would you fetch me my mother's book?"

"I will, aye—if you will sit. Just sit, Brannaugh. You're too pale."

"I'm weary, in truth, but I promise you this must be done, and we will all be better for it. Teagan—"

"I know what we need. I'll—"

"Sit," her brother insisted. "I'll get what we need, and the both of you will take your ease for a moment. Gealbhan, I swear by the gods, sit on the pair of them if they don't rest for a bit."

Gealbhan had only to touch his wife's cheek, to take Brannaugh's hand to have them heed. "What must be done?" he asked Teagan.

"An offering. An asking. A gathering. He cannot come here. Cabhan cannot come here, or see here. Here he has no power. And here, we can gather ours together."

"What do you need?"

"You are the best of us." She kissed his cheek. "If you would help Eamon, I promise you Brannaugh and I will bide here, will rest."

When he'd gone, she turned quickly to Brannaugh. "You have pain."

"It's not the birthing pains. You'll learn the babe often gives you a bit of a taste of what's coming. This will pass. But the rest is welcome. What we will do here will take strength."

They took an hour, to rest, to prepare.

"We must cast the circle," she told Eoghan, "and make the offering. Do not fear for me."

"Would you ask me not to breathe?"

"It is your love, your faith, and Gealbhan's with yours we need."

"Then you have it."

They cast the circle, and the cauldron floated over the fire they made. Water flowed from Teagan's hands into the cauldron. Brannaugh added herbs, Eamon crushed stones.

"These come from the home we made."

"And these." Teagan opened a pouch, poured in the precious. "From the home we seek. Small things, a dried flower, a pebble, a bit of bark."

"More than gold or silver treasured. We offer to you. Here, a lock of hair from my firstborn."

"A feather from my guide." Eamon added it to the now bubbling cauldron.

"This charm my mother made me."

“Ah, Teagan,” Brannaugh murmured.

“She would wish it.” Teagan added it to the offering.

“To you we give what we hold dear, and add to them this witch’s tear. And seal with blood this brew to show our hearts are true.”

And each with a sacred knife offered their blood, and with it the bubbling cauldron boiled and smoked.

“Father, mother, blood of our blood and bone of our bone, we orphans have faith forever shown. Grant us here in this holy place, in this holy hour the might and right of your power. With your gift we cannot fail and over Cabhan will prevail. Imbue us now, we witches three. As we will, so mote it be.”

The wind had stirred inside the walls. The candlelight gone brilliant. But at the final words the three spoke together, the wind whirled, the light flashed.

The voices that had murmured, rang out.

With her siblings Brannaugh clasped hands, with them she dropped to her knees.

It ripped through her, the light, the voices, the wind. And the power.

Then came silence.

She rose again, and with Teagan and Eamon turned.

“You were alight,” Eoghan said in wonder. “Like candles yourselves.”

“We are the three.” Teagan’s voice rose and echoed in the humming silence. “But there are many. Many before us, many who come after.”

“Their light is ours; ours is theirs.” Eamon lifted his arms, his sisters’ high. “We are the three, and we are one.”

Filled with light, fatigue vanished, suffused, Brannaugh smiled. “We are the three. We cast our light over the dark, we seek it out of its shadows. And we will prevail.”

“By our blood,” they said together, “we will prevail.”

• • •

IN THE MORNING, IN THE SOFT LIGHT OF DAY, THEY SET OUT again. They traveled the road with green hills rising, with water shining blue under a welcoming sun. Toward the grand gray stones of Ashford they rode, where the gates were open for them, the bridge drawn down, and the sun shined bright over the water, over the land of their birth.

And so Sorcha’s children came home.

BRANNA O'DWYER WOKE TO A GRAY, SOGGY, RELENTLESS rain. And wished for nothing more than to burrow in and sleep again. Mornings, she had always felt, came forever too soon. But like it or not, sleep was done, and with its leaving came a slow and steady craving for coffee.

Annoyed, as she was often annoyed by morning, she rose, pulled thick socks over her feet, drew a sweater over the thin T-shirt she'd slept in.

Through habit and an ingrained tidiness, she stirred up the bedroom fire so the licks of flame would cheer the room, and with her hound, Kathel, having his morning stretch on the hearthrug, she made her bed, added the mounds of pretty pillows that pleased her.

In her bath, she brushed out her long fall of black hair, then bundled it up. She had work, and plenty of it—after coffee. She frowned at herself in the mirror, considered doing a bit of a glamour, as the restless night surely showed. But didn't see the point.

Instead, she walked back into the bedroom, gave Kathel a good rub to get his tail wagging.

"You were restless as well, weren't you now? I heard you talking in your sleep. Did you hear the voices, my boy?"

They walked down together, quiet, as her house was full as it was too often these days. Her brother and Meara shared his bed, and her cousin Iona shared hers with Boyle.

Friends and family all. She loved them, and needed them. But God be sweet, she could've done with some alone.

"They stay for me," she told Kathel as they walked down the steps of the pretty cottage. "As if I can't look after myself. Have I not put enough protection around what's mine, and theirs, to hold off a dozen Cabhans?"

It had to stop, really, she decided, heading straight toward her lovely, lovely coffee machine. A man of Boyle McGrath's size could hardly be comfortable in her cousin Iona's little bed. She needed to nudge them along. In any case, there had been no sign nor shadow of Cabhan since Samhain.

"We almost had him. Bugger it, we nearly finished it."

The spell, the potion, both so strong, she thought as she started the coffee. Hadn't they worked on both hard and long? And the power, by the gods, the power had risen like a flood that night by Sorcha's old cabin.

They'd hurt him, spilled his blood, sent him howling—wolf and man. And still . . .

Not done. He'd slipped through, and would be healing, would be gathering himself.

Not done, and at times she wondered if ever it would be.

She opened the door, and Kathel rushed out. Rain or no, the dog wanted his morning run. She stood in the open doorway, in the cold, frosty December air, looking toward the woods.

He waited, she knew, beyond them. In this time or in another, she couldn't tell. But he would come again, and they must be ready.

But he wouldn't come this morning.

She closed the door on the cold, stirred up the kitchen fire, added fuel so the scent of peat soothed. Pouring her coffee, she savored the first taste, and the short time of quiet and alone. And, a magick of its own, the coffee cleared her head, smoothed her mood.

We will prevail.

The voices, she remembered now. So many voices rising up, echoing out. Light and power and purpose. In sleep she'd felt it all. And that single voice, so clear, so sure.

We will prevail.

“We'll pray you're right about it.”

She turned.

The woman stood, a hand protectively over the mound of her belly, a thick shawl tied around a long dress of dark blue.

Almost a mirror, Branna thought, almost like peering into a glass. The hair, the eyes, the shape of the face.

“You're Brannaugh of Sorcha. I know you from dreams.”

“Aye, and you, Branna of the clan O'Dwyer. I know you from dreams. You're my blood.”

“I am. I am of the three.” Branna touched the amulet with its icon of the hound she was never without—just as her counterpart did the same.

“Your brother came to us, with his woman, one night in Clare.”

“Connor, and Meara. She is a sister to me.” Now Branna touched her heart. “Here. You understand.”

“She saved my own brother from harm, shed blood for him. She is a sister to me as well.” With some wonder on her face, Sorcha's Brannaugh looked around the kitchen. “What is this place?”

“My home. And yours for you are very welcome here. Will you sit? I would make you tea. This coffee I have would not be good for the baby.”

“It has a lovely scent. But only sit with me, cousin. Just sit for a moment. This is a wondrous place.”

Branna looked around her kitchen—tidy, lovely, as she'd designed it herself. And, she supposed, wondrous indeed to a woman from the thirteenth century.

“Progress,” she said as she sat at the kitchen table with her cousin. “It eases hours of work. Are you well?”

“I am, very well. My son comes soon. My third child. She reached out; Branna took her hand.

Heat and light, a merging of power very strong, very true.

“You will name him Ruarc, for he will be a champion.”

It brought a smile to her cousin's face. “So I will.”

“On Samhain, we—the three and three more who are with us—battled Cabhan. Though we caused him harm,

burned and bled him, we didn't finish him. I saw you there. Your brother with a sword, your sister with a wand, you with a bow. You were not with child."

"Samhain is yet a fortnight to come in my time. We came to you?"

"You did, at Sorcha's cabin where we lured him, and in your time, as we shifted into it to try to trap him. We were close, but it wasn't enough. My book—Sorcha's book—I could show you the spell, the poison we conjured. You may—"

Brannaugh held up a hand, pressed the other to her side. "My son comes. And he pulls me back. But listen, there is a place, a holy place. An abbey. It sits in a field, a day's travel south."

"Ballintubber. Iona weds her Boyle there come spring. It is a holy place, a strong place."

"He cannot go there, see there. It is sacred, and those who made us watch over it. They gave us, Sorcha's three, their light, their hope and strength. When next you face down Cabhan, we will be with you. We will find a way. We will prevail. If it is not to be you, there will come another three. Believe, Branna of the O'Dwyers. Find the way."

"I can do nothing else."

"Love." She gripped Branna's hand hard. "Love, I have learned, is another guide. Trust your guides. Oh, he's impatient. My child comes today. Be joyful, for he is another bright candle against the dark. Believe," she said again, and vanished.

Branna rose, and with a thought lit a candle for the new light, the new life.

And with a sigh, accepted her alone was at an end.

So she started breakfast. She had a story to tell, and no one would want to hear it on an empty stomach. Believe, she thought—Well, she believed it was part of her lot in life to cook for an army on nearly a daily basis.

She swore an oath that when they'd sent Cabhan to hell she'd take a holiday, somewhere warm, sunny—where she wouldn't touch a pot, pan, or skillet for days on end.

She began to mix the batter for pancakes—a recipe new to her she'd wanted to try—and Meara came in.

Her friend was dressed for the day, a working day at the stables, in thick trousers, a warm sweater, sturdy boots. She'd braided back her bark brown hair, sent Branna a cautious look with her dark gypsy eyes.

"I promised I'd see to breakfast this morning."

"I woke early, after a restless night. And have already had company this morning."

"Someone's here?"

"Was here. Drag the others down, would you, so I'll tell my tale all at once." She hesitated only a moment. "Best if Connor or Boyle rings up Fin, and asks if he'd come over as well."

"It's Cabhan. Is he back?"

“He’s coming, right enough, but no.”

“I’ll get the others. Everyone’s up, so it won’t take long.”

With a nod, Branna set bacon sizzling in a pan.

BLOOD MAGICK (THE COUSINS O'DWYER TRILOGY) BY NORA ROBERTS PDF

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From #1 New York Times bestselling author Nora Roberts comes the final novel in a trilogy about the land we're drawn to, the family we learn to cherish, and the people we long to love...

Book Three of The Cousins O'Dwyer Trilogy
Blood Magick

County Mayo is rich in the traditions of Ireland, legends that Branna O'Dwyer fully embraces in her life and in her work as the proprietor of The Dark Witch shop, which carries soaps, lotions, and candles for tourists, made with Branna's special touch.

Branna's strength and selflessness hold together a close circle of friends and family—along with their horses and hawks and her beloved hound. But there's a single missing link in the chain of her life: love...

She had it once—for a moment—with Finbar Burke, but a shared future is forbidden by history and blood. Which is why Fin has spent his life traveling the world to fill the abyss left in him by Branna, focusing on work rather than passion.

Branna and Fin's relationship offers them both comfort and torment. And though they succumb to the heat between them, there can be no promises for tomorrow. A storm of shadows threatens everything that their circle holds dear. It will be Fin's power, loyalty, and heart that will make all the difference in an age-old battle between the bonds that hold their friends together and the evil that has haunted their families for centuries.

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Dark Witch
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Review

"America's favorite writer."—The New Yorker

"When it comes to compelling, entertaining tales, Roberts is peerless...This is a quintessential Roberts story filled with friendship, passion, loyalty and undying love."—RT Book Reviews

From the Trade Paperback edition.

About the Author

Nora Roberts is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of more than 200 novels. She is also the author of the bestselling In Death series written under the pen name J. D. Robb. There are more than 500 million copies of her books in print.

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1

Summer 1276

ON A BRIGHT DAY AS SUMMER FADED, BRANNAUGH gathered herbs, flowers, foliage, all for salves and potions and teas. They came to her, neighbors, travelers, for their hopes and healings. They came to her, the Dark Witch, as once they'd come to her mother, with aches in body, in heart, in spirit, and paid with coin or service or trade.

So she and her brother, her sister, had built their lives in Clare, so far from their home in Mayo. Far from the cabin in the woods where they had lived, where their mother had died.

So she had built her life, more contented, more joyful than she'd believed possible since that terrible day their mother had given them all but the dregs of her own power, had sent them away to be safe as she sacrificed herself.

All grief, Brannaugh thought now, all duty and fear as she'd done what was asked of her, as she'd led her younger brother and little sister away from home.

They'd left love, childhood, and all innocence behind.

Long years. The first few spent, as their mother had bid, with their cousin and her man—safe, tended, welcomed. But the time had come, as time does, to leave that nest, to embrace who and what they were, and would ever be.

The Dark Witches three.

Their duty, their purpose above all else? To destroy Cabhan, the dark sorcerer, the murderer of their father, Daithi the brave, of their mother, Sorcha. Cabhan, who had somehow survived the spell the dying Sorcha had cast.

But on such a bright day in summer's end, it all seemed so far away—the terrors of that last winter, the blood and death of that last spring.

Here, in the home she'd made, the air smelled of the rosemary in her basket, of the roses planted by her

husband on the birth of their first child. The clouds puffed white as lambs across the blue meadow of the sky, and the woods, the little fields they'd cleared, as green as emeralds.

Her son, not yet three years, sat in a patch of sun and banged on the little drum his father had made him. He sang and hooted and beat with such joyous innocence her eyes burned from the love.

Her daughter, barely a year, slept clutching her favored rag doll while guarded by Kathel, their faithful hound.

And another son stirred and kicked in her womb.

From where she stood she could see the clearing, and the little cabin she, Eamon, and Teagan had built near to eight years before. Children, she thought now. They'd been but children who could not embrace childhood.

They lived there still, close. Eamon the loyal, so strong and true. Teagan, so kind and fair. So happy now, Brannaugh thought, and Teagan so in love with the man she'd married in the spring.

All so peaceful, she thought, despite Brin's banging and hooting. The cabin, the trees, the green hills with their dots of sheep, the gardens, the bright blue sky.

And it would have to end. It would have to end soon.

The time was coming—she felt it as sure as she felt the babe's kicks in her womb. The bright days would give way to the dark. The peace would end in blood and battle.

She touched the amulet with its symbol of a hound. The protection her mother had conjured with blood magicks. Soon, she thought, all too soon now, she would need that protection again.

She pressed a hand to the small of her back as it ached a bit, and saw her man riding toward home.

Eoghan, so handsome, so hers. Eyes as green as the hills, hair a raven's wing that curled to his shoulders. He rode tall and straight and easy on the sturdy chestnut mare, his voice lifted—as often it was—in song.

By the gods, he made her smile, he made her heart lift like a bird on the wing. She, who had been so sure there could be no love for her, no family but her blood, no life but her purpose, had fallen deeper than oceans for Eoghan of Clare.

Brin leaped up, began to run as fast as his little legs could manage, all the while calling.

“Da, Da, Da!”

Eoghan leaned down, scooped the boy up in the saddle. The laugh, the man's, the boy's mixed, flew toward her. Her eyes stung yet again. In that moment, she would have given all of her power, every drop given her, to spare them what was to come.

The baby she'd named for her mother whimpered, and Kathel stirred his old bones to let out a soft woof.

“I hear her.” Brannaugh set down her basket, moved over to lift her waking daughter, snuggled her in with kisses as Eoghan rode up beside her.

“Look here, would you, what I found on the road. Some little lost gypsy.”

“Ah well, I suppose we should keep him. It may be he’ll clean up fine, then we can sell him at the market.”

“He might fetch us a good price.” Eoghan kissed the top of his giggling son’s head. “Off you go, lad.”

“Ride, Da!” Brin turned his head, beseeched with big dark eyes. “Please! Ride!”

“A quick one, then I want me tea.” He winked at Brannaugh before setting off in a gallop that had the boy shouting with delight.

Brannaugh picked up her basket, shifted young Sorcha on her hip. “Come, old friend,” she said to Kathel. “It’s time for your tonic.”

She moved to the pretty cottage Eoghan with his clever hands and strong back had built. Inside, she stirred the fire, settled her daughter, started the tea.

Stroking Kathel, she doused him with the tonic she’d conjured to keep him healthy and clear-eyed. Her guide, her heart, she thought, she could stretch his life a few years more. And would know when the time came to let him go.

But not yet, no, not yet.

She set out honey cakes, some jam, and had the tea ready when Eoghan and Brin came in, hand in hand.

“Well now, this is fine.”

He scrubbed Brin’s head, leaned down to kiss Brannaugh, lingered over it as he always did.

“You’re home early,” she began, then her mother’s eye caught her son reaching for a cake. “Wash those hands first, my boy, then you’ll sit like a gentleman for your tea.”

“They’re not dirty, Ma.” He held them out.

Brannaugh just lifted her eyebrows at the grubby little hands. “Wash. The both of you.”

“There’s no arguing with women,” Eoghan told Brin. “It’s a lesson you’ll learn. I finished the shed for the widow O’Brian. It’s God’s truth her boy is useless as teats on a billy goat, and wandered off to his own devices. The job went quicker without him.”

He spoke of his work as he helped his son dry his hands, spoke of work to come as he swung his daughter up, set her to squealing with delight.

“You’re the joy in this house,” she murmured. “You’re the light of it.”

He gave her a quiet look, set the baby down again. “You’re the heart of it. Sit down, off your feet awhile. Have your tea.”

He waited. Oh, she knew him for the most patient of men. Or the most stubborn, for one was often the same as the other, at least wrapped inside the like of her Eoghan.

So when the chores were finished, and supper done, when the children tucked up for the night, he took her hand.

“Will you walk out with me, lovely Brannaugh? For it’s a fine night.”

How often, she wondered, had he said those words to her when he wooed her—when she tried flicking him away like a gnat in the air?

Now, she simply got her shawl—a favorite Teagan had made her—wrapped it around her shoulders. She glanced at Kathel lying by the fire.

Watch the babes for me, she told him, and let Eoghan draw her out into the cool, damp night.

“Rain’s coming,” she said. “Before morning.”

“Then we’re lucky, aren’t we, to have the night.” He laid a hand over her belly. “All’s well?”

“It is. He’s a busy little man, always on the move. Much like his father.”

“We’re well set, Brannaugh. We could pay for a bit of help.”

She slanted him a look. “Do you have complaints about the state of the house, the children, the food on the table?”

“I don’t have a one, not for a single thing. I watched my mother work herself to bones.” As he spoke he rubbed the small of her back, as if he knew of the small, nagging ache there. “I wouldn’t have it of you, aghra.”

“I’m well, I promise you.”

“Why are you sad?”

“I’m not.” A lie, she realized, and she never lied to him. “A little. Carrying babies makes a woman a bit daft from time to time, as you should know. Didn’t I weep buckets when carrying Brin when you brought in the cradle you’d made? Wept as if the world was ending.”

“From joy. This isn’t joy.”

“There is joy. Only today I stood here, looking at our children, feeling the next move in me, thinking of you, and of the life we have. Such joy, Eoghan. How many times did I say no to you when you asked me to be yours?”

“Once was too many.”

She laughed, though the tears rose up in her throat. “But you would ask again, and again. You wooed me with song and story, with wildflowers. Still, I told you I would be no man’s wife.”

“None but mine.”

“None but yours.”

She breathed in the night, the scent of the gardens, the forest, the hills. She breathed in what had become home, knowing she would leave it for the home of childhood, and for destiny.

“You knew what I was, what I am. And still, you wanted me—not the power, but me.”

Knowing that meant all the world to her, and knowing it had opened the heart she'd determined to keep locked.

"And when I could no longer stop myself from loving you, I told you all there is, all of it, refusing you again. But you asked again. Do you remember what you said to me?"

"I'll say it to you again." He turned to her, took her hands as he had on the day years before. "You're mine, and I am yours. All that you are, I'll take. All that I am, I'll give. I'll be with you, Brannaugh, Dark Witch of Mayo, through fire and flood, through joy and grief, through battle and through peace. Look in my heart, for you have that power. Look in me, and know love."

"And I did. And I do. Eoghan." She pressed against him, burrowed into him. "There is such joy."

But she wept.

He stroked, soothed, then eased her away to see her face in the pale moonlight. "We must go back. Go back to Mayo."

"Soon. Soon. I'm sorry—"

"No." He touched his lips to hers, stilled her words. "You will not say so to me. Did you not hear my words?"

"How could I know? Even when you spoke them, when I felt them capture my heart, how could I know I would feel like this? I would wish with all I am to stay, just stay. To be here with you, to leave all the rest behind and away. And I can't. I can't give us that. Eoghan, our children."

"Nothing will touch them." Again he laid a hand on her belly. "Nothing and no one. I swear it."

"You must swear it, for when the time comes I must leave them and face Cabhan with my brother and sister."

"And with me." He gripped her shoulders as fire and fierceness lit his eyes. "Whatever you face, I face."

"You must swear." Gently she drew his hands back down to her belly where their son kicked. "Our children, Eoghan, you must swear to protect them above all. You and Teagan's man must protect them against Cabhan. I could never do what I must do unless I know their father and their uncle guard and protect them. As you love me, Eoghan, swear it."

"I would give my life for you." He rested his brow on hers, and she felt his struggle—man, husband, father. "I swear to you, I would give my life for our children. I will swear to protect them."

"I am blessed in you." She lifted his hands from her belly to her lips. "Blessed in you. You would not ask me to stay?"

"All that you are," he reminded her. "You took an oath, and that oath is mine as well. I am with you, mo chroi."

"You are the light in me." On a sigh, she rested her head on his shoulder. "The light that shines in our children."

She would use all she was to protect that light, all that came from it, and at last, at last, vanquish the dark.

• • •

SHE BIDED, TAKING EACH DAY, HOLDING IT CLOSE. WHEN HER children rested, when the one inside her insisted she rest as well, she sat by the fire with her mother's spell book. Studied, added her own spells, her own words and thoughts. This, she knew, she would pass down as she passed the amulet. To her children, and to the child who came from her who would carry the purpose of the Dark Witch should she and Eamon, Teagan fail.

Their mother had sworn they—or their blood—would destroy Cabhan. She had seen, with her own eyes, one of their blood from another time, had spoken to him. And she dreamed of another, a woman with her name, who wore the amulet she wore now, who was, as she was, one of three.

Sorcha's three would have children, and they would have children in turn. So the legacy would continue, and the purpose with it, until it was done. She would not, could not, turn away from it.

She would not, could not, turn away from the stirrings in her own blood as summer drew down.

But she had children to tend, a home to tend in turn, animals to feed and care for, a garden to harvest, the little goat to milk. Neighbors and travelers to heal and help.

And magicks, bright, bright magicks, to preserve.

So with her children napping—and oh, Brin had put up a battle heroic against closing his eyes—she stepped outside for a breath.

And saw her sister, her bright hair braided down her back, walking up the path with a basket.

“You must have heard me wishing for your company, for I'm after some conversation with someone more than two years of age.”

“I've brown bread, for I baked more than enough. And I was yearning for you as well.”

“We'll have some now, as I'm hungry every minute of every day.” Laughing, Brannaugh opened her arms to her sister.

Teagan, so pretty with her hair like sunlight, her eyes like the bluebells their mother had prized.

Brannaugh gathered her close—then immediately drew her back again.

“You're with child!”

“And you couldn't give me the chance to say so to you myself?” Glowing, beaming, Teagan grabbed hold for another strong embrace. “I was only just sure of it this morning. I waked, and I knew there was life in me. I haven't told Gealbhan, for I needed first to tell you. And to be sure of it, absolutely sure. Now I am. I'm babbling like a brook. I can't stop.”

“Teagan.” Brannaugh's eyes welled as she kissed her sister's cheeks, as she remembered the little girl who'd wept on that dark morning so long ago. “Blessed be, deirfiúr bheag. Come inside. I'll make you some tea, something good for you and the life in you.”

“I want to tell Gealbhan,” she said as she went in with Brannaugh, took off her shawl. “By the little stream where he first kissed me. And then tell Eamon he'll again be an uncle. I want music and happy voices. Will

you and Eoghan bring the children this evening?”

“We will, of course, we will. We’ll have music and happy voices.”

“I miss Ma. Oh, it’s foolish, I know, but I want to tell her. I want to tell Da. I’m holding a life inside me, one that came from them. Was it so with you?”

“Aye, each time. When Brin came, and then my own Sorcha, I saw her for a moment, just for a moment. I felt her, and Da as well. I felt them there when my babes loosed their first cry. There was joy in that, Teagan, and sorrow. And then . . .”

“Tell me.”

Her gray eyes full of that joy, that sorrow, Brannaugh folded her hands over the child within her. “The love is so fierce, so full. That life that you hold, not in your womb, but in your arms? The love that comes over you? You think you know, then you do, and what you thought you knew is pale and weak against what is. I know what she felt for us now. What she and Da felt for us. You’ll know it.”

“Can it be more than this?” Teagan pressed a hand to her middle. “It feels so huge already.”

“It can. It will.” Brannaugh looked out at the trees, at the rioting gardens. And her eyes went to smoke.

“This son in you, he will not be the one, though he’ll be strong and quick to power. Nor will the son that comes from you after him. The daughter, the third, she is the next. She will be your one of the three. Fair like you, kind in her heart, quick in her mind. You will call her Ciara. One day she will wear the sign our mother made for you.”

Suddenly light-headed, Brannaugh sat. Teagan rushed over to her.

“I’m well; I’m fine. It came over me so quick I wasn’t ready. I’m a bit slower these days.” She patted Teagan’s hand.

“I never looked. I didn’t think to.”

“Why should you think to? You’ve a right simply to be happy. I wouldn’t have spoiled that for all the worlds.”

“You haven’t. How could you spoil anything by telling me I’ll have a son, and another, and a daughter? No, sit as you are. I’ll finish the tea.”

They both glanced toward the door as it opened.

“Sure he has the nose for fresh bread, has Eamon,” Teagan said as their brother walked in with his brown hair tousled, as always, around a heartbreakingly handsome face.

With a grin he sniffed the air like a hound. “I’ve a nose, for certain, but didn’t need it to make my way here. You’ve enough light swirling around the place to turn up the moon. If you’re after doing a spell so bright, you might’ve told me.”

“We weren’t conjuring. Only talking. We’re having a bit of a céili at the cabin this evening. And you can keep Brannaugh company when I leave, so I can have time to tell Gealbhan he’s to be a father.”

“As there’s bread fresh, I can— A father is it?” Eamon’s bold blue eyes filled with delight. “There’s some happy news.” He plucked Teagan off her feet, gave her a swing, then another when she laughed. He set her down in a chair, kissed her, then grinned at Brannaugh. “I’d do the same with you, but it’s like to break my back, as you’re big as a mountain.”

“Don’t think you’ll be adding my jam to that bread.”

“A beautiful mountain. One who’s already given me a handsome nephew and a charming niece.”

“That might get you a dollop.”

“Gealbhan will be overjoyed.” Gently, as he was always gentle with Teagan, he brushed his fingers down her cheek. “You’re well then, are you, Teagan?”

“I feel more than wonderful. I’m likely to cook a feast, which will suit you, won’t it?”

“It will, aye, it will.”

“And you need to be finding the woman to suit you,” Teagan added, “for you’d make a fine father.”

“I’m more than fine with the two of you providing the children so I can be the happy uncle.”

“She’s hair like fire, eyes like the sea in storms, and a shimmer of power of her own.” Brannaugh sat back, rubbing a hand over the mound of her belly. “It comes in waves these days. Some from him, I’m thinking—he’s impatient.” Then she smiled. “It’s good seeing the woman who’d take you, Eamon. Not just for a tumble, but for the fall.”

“I’m not after a woman. Or not one in particular.”

Teagan reached out, laid a hand on his. “You think, and always have, you’re not to have a woman, a wife, as you’ve sisters to protect. You’re wrong, and always have been. We are three, Eamon, and both of us as able as you. When you love, you’ll have no say in it.”

“Don’t be arguing with a woman who carries a child, especially a witch who does,” Brannaugh said lightly. “I never looked for love, but it found me. Teagan waited for it, and it found her. You can run from it, mo dearthair. But find you it will.

“When we go home.” Her eyes filled again. “Ah, curse it, I’m watering up every time I take a breath it seems. This you have to look to, Teagan. The moods come and go as they will.”

“You felt it as well.” Now Eamon laid a hand on Brannaugh’s so the three were joined. “We’re going home, and soon.”

“At the next moon. We must leave on the next full moon.”

“I hoped it would wait,” Teagan murmured. “I hoped it would wait until you’re finished birthing, though I knew in my head and my heart it would not wait.”

“I will birth this son in Mayo. This child will be born at home. And yet . . . This is home as well. Not for you,” she said to Eamon. “You’ve waited, you’ve bided, you’ve stayed, but your heart, your mind, your spirit is ever there.”

“We were told we would go home again. So I waited. The three, the three that came from us. They wait as well.” Eamon ran his fingers over the blue stone he wore around his neck. “We’ll see them again.”

“I dream of them,” Brannaugh said. “Of the one who shares my name, and the others as well. They fought and they failed.”

“They will fight again,” Teagan said.

“They gave him pain.” A fierce light came into Eamon’s eyes. “He bled, as he bled when the woman named Meara, the one who came with Connor of the three, struck him with her sword.”

“He bled,” Brannaugh agreed. “And he healed. He gathers again. He pulls in power from the dark. I can’t see where, how, but feel only. I can’t see if we will change what’s to come, if we can and will end him. But I see them, and know if we cannot, they will fight again.”

“So we go home, and find the way. So they who come from us won’t fight alone.”

Brannaugh thought of her children, sleeping upstairs. Safe, innocent still. And the children of her children’s children, in another time, in Mayo. Neither safe, she thought, nor innocent.

“We will find the way. We will go home. But tonight, for tonight, we’ll feast. We’ll have music. And we three will give thanks to all who came before us for the light. For the lives,” she said, with a hand light on his sister’s belly, and one on her own.

“And tomorrow.” Eamon stood. “We begin to end what took the lives of our father, of our mother.”

“Will you bide with Brannaugh? I would speak with Gealbhan now.”

“Give him only the joy today.” Brannaugh rose with her sister. “Tomorrow is soon enough for the rest. Take today for joy alone, for time is so short.”

“I will.” She kissed her sister, her brother. “Eoghan must bring his harp.”

“Be sure he will. We’ll fill the wood with music and send it flying over the hills.”

She sat again when Teagan left, and Eamon nudged her tea toward her. “Drink it. You’re pale.”

“A bit tired. Eoghan knows. I’ve talked with him, and he’s ready to leave—leave all he built here. I never thought it would be hard to go back. Never knew I would be torn in two ways.”

“Gealbhan’s brothers will tend the land here, for you and for Teagan.”

“Aye, and it’s a comfort. Not for you, the land here it’s never been for you.” Here again was sorrow and joy mixed into one. “You will stay in Mayo, whatever comes. I can’t see what we will do, Eoghan and I, the children. But Teagan will come back here, that I see clear. This is her place now.”

“It is,” he agreed. “She will ever be a dark witch of Mayo, but her home and heart are for Clare.”

“How will it be for us, Eamon, not to be together as we have been all our lives?”

His eyes, the wild blue of their father’s, looked deep into hers. “A distance in space means nothing. We are always together.”

“I’m weepy and foolish, and I dislike it very much. I hope this mood is a brief one or I might curse myself.”

“Well, you were given to tempers and sharp words toward the end of carrying young Sorcha. It may be I prefer the weeping.”

“I don’t, that’s for certain.” She drank the tea, knowing it would settle her. “I’ll add a bit more to the tonic I give Kathel and Alastar, for the journey. Roibeard does well without it yet. He’s strong.”

“He’s hunting now,” Eamon said of his hawk. “He goes farther each time. He goes north now, every day north. He knows, as we do, we’ll travel soon.”

“We will send word ahead. We will be welcome at Ashford Castle. The children of Sorcha and Daithi. The Dark Witches will be made welcome.”

“I’ll see to that.” He sat back with his own tea, smiled at her. “Hair like fire, is it?”

As he’d wanted, she laughed. “Oh, and you’ll be struck dumb and half blind, I promise you, when you meet.”

“Not I, my darling. Not I.”

2

FOR THE CHILDREN IT WAS AN ADVENTURE. THE IDEA OF a long journey, of the traveling to a new place—with the prize of a castle at the end of it, had Brin especially eager to go, to begin.

While Brannaugh packed what they’d need, she thought again of that long-ago morning, rushing to do her mother’s bidding, packing all she was told to pack. So urgent, she thought now, so final. And that last look at her mother, burning with the power left in her, outside the cabin in the woods.

Now she packed to go back, a duty, a destiny she’d always accepted. Eagerly wished for—until the birth of her first child, until that swamping flood of love for the boy who even now raced about all but feverish in his excitement.

But she had a task yet to face here.

She gathered what she needed—bowl, candle, book, the herbs and stones. And with a glance at her little boy, felt both pride and regret.

“It is time for him, for this,” she told Eoghan.

Understanding, he kissed her forehead. “I’ll take Sorcha up. It’s time she was abed.”

Nodding, she turned to Brin, called him.

“I’m not tired. Why can’t we leave now and sleep under the stars?”

“We leave on the morrow, but first there are things we must do, you and I.”

She sat, opened her arms. “First, come sit with me. My boy,” she murmured, when he crawled onto her lap. “My heart. You know what I am.”

“Ma,” he said and cuddled into her.

“I am, but you know, as I’ve never hidden it from you, what I am besides. Dark witch, keeper of magicks, daughter of Sorcha and Daithi. This is my blood. This is your blood as well. See the candle?”

“You made the candle. Ma’s make the candles and bake the cakes, and Da’s ride the horses.”

“Is that the way of it?” She laughed, and decided she’d let him have that illusion for a little while more. “Well, it’s true enough I made the candle. See the wick, Brin? The wick is cold and without light. See the candle, Brin, see the wick. See the light and flame, the tiny flame, and the heat, the light to be. You have the light in you, the flame in you. See the wick, Brin.”

She crooned it to him, over and over, felt his energy begin to settle, his thoughts begin to join with her.

“The light is power. The power is light. In you, of you, through you. Your blood, my blood, our blood, your light, my light, our light. Feel what lives in you, what waits in you. See the wick, it waits for your light. For your power. Bring it. Let it rise, slow, slow, gentle and clean. Reach for it, for it belongs to you. Reach, touch, rise. Bring the light.”

The wick sparked, died away, sparked again, then burned true.

Brannaugh pressed a kiss to the top of his head. There, she thought, there, the first learned. And her boy would never be just a child again.

Joy and sorrow, forever entwined.

“That is well done.”

He turned his face up, smiled at her. “Can I do another?”

“Aye,” she said, kissed him again. “But heed me now, and well, for there is more to learn, more to know. And the first you must know, must heed, must vow is you harm none with what you are, what you have. Your gift, Brin? An’ it harm none. Swear this to me, to yourself, to all who’ve come before, all who will come after.”

She lifted her athame, used it on her palm. “A blood oath we make. Mother to son, son to mother, witch to witch.”

Solemn-eyed, he held out his hand to her, blinked at the quick pain when she nicked it.

“An’ it harm none,” he said when she took his hand, mixed her blood with his.

“An’ it harm none,” she repeated, then gathered him close, kissed the little hurt, healed it. “Now, you may do another candle. And after, together, we will make charms, for protection. For you, for your sister, for your father.”

“What of you, Ma?”

She touched her pendant. “I have what I need.”

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IN THE MORNING MISTS, SHE CLIMBED ONTO THE WAGON, her little girl bundled at her side. She looked at her boy, so flushed with delight in the saddle in front of his father. She looked at her sister, fair and quiet astride Alastar; her brother, their grandfather's sword at his side, tall and straight on the horse he called Mithra. And Gealbhan steady and waiting on the pretty mare Alastar had sired three summers before.

She clucked to Gealbhan's old plow horse, and with Brin letting out a whoop, began. She looked back once, just once at the house she'd come to love, asked herself if she would ever see it again.

Then, she looked ahead.

A healer found welcome wherever she went—as did a harpist. Though the baby heavy in her belly was often restless, she and her family found shelter and hospitality along the wild way.

Eoghan made music, she or Teagan or Eamon offered salves or potions to the ailing or the injured. Gealbhan offered his strong back and calloused hands.

One fine night they slept under the stars as Brin so wished, and there was comfort in knowing the hound, the hawk, the horse guarded what was hers.

They met no trouble along the way, but then she knew the word had gone about. The Dark Witches, all three, journeyed through Clare and on to Galway.

“The word would reach Cabhan as well,” Eamon said as they paused in their travels to rest the horses, to let the children run free for a time.

She sat between him and Teagan while Gealbhan and Eoghan watered the horses and Eamon dropped a line into the water.

“We're stronger than we were,” Teagan reminded him. “We journeyed south as children. We go north children no more.”

“He worries.” Brannaugh stroked her belly. “As you and I carry more than we did.”

“I don't doubt your power or your will.”

“And still you worry.”

“I wonder if it must be now,” Eamon admitted, “even knowing it must be now. I feel it as both of you, and yet would be easier if there was time for both of you to have proper lyings-in before we face what we must face.”

“What's meant is meant, but in truth I'm glad we'll break our journey for a day or so with our cousins. And by all the gods I'll be happy to have a day off that bloody wagon.”

“I'm dreaming of Ailish's honey cakes, for no one has a finer hand with them.”

“Dreaming with his belly,” Teagan said.

“A man needs to eat. Hah!” He pulled up the line, and the wriggling fish who'd taken the hook. “And so we will.”

“You'll need more than one,” Brannaugh said, and reminded them all of those same words their mother

spoke on a fine and happy day on the river at home.

They left the rugged wilds of Clare, pushed by fierce winds, sudden driving rains. They rode through the green hills of Galway, by fields of bleating sheep, by cottages where smoke puffed from chimneys. Roibeard winged ahead, under and through layers of clouds that turned the sky into a soft gray sea.

The children napped in the wagon, tucked in among the bundles, so Kathel sat beside Brannaugh, ever alert.

“There are more cottages than I remember.” Teagan rode beside her on the tireless Alastar.

“The years pass.”

“It’s good land here—I can all but hear Gealbhan thinking it.”

“Would you plant yourself here then? Does it speak to you?”

“It does. But so does our cabin in the woods in Clare. And still, the closer we come to home, the more I ache for it. We had to put that aside for so long, all of us, but now . . . Do you feel it, Brannaugh? That call to home?”

“Aye.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Aye. Of what’s to come, but more of failing.”

“We won’t.” At Brannaugh’s sharp look, Teagan shook her head. “No, I’ve had no vision, but only a certainty. One that grows stronger as we come closer to home. We won’t fail, for light will always beat the dark, though it take a thousand years.”

“You sound like her,” Brannaugh murmured. “Like our mother.”

“She’s in all of us, so we won’t fail. Oh, look, Brannaugh! That tree there with the twisted branches. It’s the very one Eamon told our cousin Mabh came to life each full moon, to scare her. We’re nearly to Ailish’s farm. We’re all but there.”

“Go on, ride ahead.”

Her face lit so she might’ve been a child again, Teagan tossed back her head and laughed. “So I will.”

She rode to her husband, let out a fresh laugh, then set off in a gallop. Beside Brannaugh, Kathel whined, quivered.

“Go on then.” Brannaugh gave him a stroke.

He leaped out of the wagon, raced behind the horse with the hawk flying above them.

It was a homecoming, for they’d lived on the farm for five years. Brannaugh found it as tidy as ever, with new outbuildings, a new paddock where young horses danced.

She saw a young boy with bright hair all but wrapped around Kathel. And knew when the boy smiled at her, he was Lughaidh, the youngest and last of her cousin’s brood.

Ailish herself rushed over to the wagon. She'd grown a bit rounder, and streaks of gray touched her own fair hair. But her eyes were as lively and young as ever.

"Brannaugh! Oh look at our Brannaugh! Seamus, come over and help your cousin down from the wagon."

"I'm fine." Brannaugh clambered down herself, embraced her cousin. "Oh, oh, it does my heart good to see you again."

"And mine, seeing you. Oh, you're a beauty, as ever. So like your mother. And here's our Eamon, so handsome. My cousins, three, come back as you said you would. I've sent the twins off to get Bardan from the field, and Seamus, you run over and tell Mabh her cousins are here."

Teary-eyed, she embraced Brannaugh again. "Mabh and her man have their own cottage, just across the way. She's near ready to birth her first. I'm to be a granny! Oh, I can't stop my tongue from wagging. It's Eoghan, aye? And Teagan's Gealbhan. Welcome, welcome all of you. But where are your children?"

"Asleep in the wagon."

Nothing would do but for Ailish to gather them up, to ply them with the honey cakes Eamon remembered so fondly. Then Conall, who'd been but a babe in arms when last she'd seen him, took her children off to see a new litter of puppies.

"They'll be fine, my word on it," Ailish said as she poured out tea. "He's a good lad, is Conall—one you helped bring into the world. We'll let the men see to the horses and that, and you'll both take your ease awhile."

"Praise be." Brannaugh sipped the tea, let it and the fire warm her, soothe her. "I'm sitting in a chair that's not moving."

"Eat. You've another in you who needs the food as well."

"I'm starving all the day and half the night. Teagan's not as hungry—yet. But she will be."

"Oh, are you carrying?" Delight glowed on her face as Ailish stopped her fussing with tea, laid her hands over her own heart. "My sweet little Teagan, to be a mother. The years, where do they go? You were but a babe yourself. Will you stay? Will you stay until your time comes?" she asked Brannaugh. "It's still a distance to Mayo, and you're close. I can see you're close."

"A day or two only, and so grateful for it. The babe will be born in Mayo. It's meant. It's what must be."

"Must it?" Ailish gripped Brannaugh's hand, then Teagan's in turn. "Must it? You've made your lives in Clare. You're women, mothers. Must you go back to the dark that waits?"

"We're women, and mothers, and more. We can turn our back on none of it. But don't fret, cousin. Don't think of it. We have today, with tea and cakes and family."

"We will come back again." When they looked at her, Teagan pressed a hand to her heart. "I feel it so strong. We will come back again. Believe that. Believe in us. I think faith only makes us stronger."

"If that's so, you'll have all of mine."

They had music and feasting and family. And for a night and a day peace. Still Brannaugh found herself

restless. Though her man slept in the bed Ailish had provided them, she sat by the fire.

Ailish came in, wearing her night-robos and a thick shawl.

“You need some of the tea you always made for me when I was so close to the end, and the babe so heavy in me I couldn’t sleep.”

“I look for her in the fire and smoke,” Brannaugh murmured. “I can’t help the looking, I miss her so. More as we near home. I miss my father; it’s an ache. But my mother is a kind of grieving that won’t end.”

“I know it.” Ailish sat beside her. “Does she come to you?”

“In dreams. There are moments, but only moments. I long to hear her voice, to have her tell me I’m doing right. That I’m doing what she’d want of me.”

“Oh, my love, you are. You are. Do you remember the day you left us?”

“I do. I hurt you by leaving.”

“Leaving always hurts, but it was what was right—I’ve come to know it. Before you left you told me of Lughaidh, the babe I carried. You said he must be the last, for neither I nor a babe would live through another birthing. And you gave me a potion to drink, every moon until the bottle was empty. So there would be no more children for me. It grieved me.”

“I know.” And knew it more poignantly now that she had her own children. “You are the best of mothers, and were one to me.”

“I would not have lived to see my children grown, to see my oldest girl ripe with her own child. To see, as you told me, Lughaidh, so bright and sweet, with a voice—as you said—like an angel.”

Nodding, Ailish studied the fire in turn, as if seeing that day again in the smoke and flame. “You laid protection over me and mine, gave me the years I might not have had. You are what she would want. Even as it grieves me that you will go, you will face Cabhan, I know you must. Never doubt she is proud of you. Never doubt, Brannaugh.”

“You comfort me, Ailish.”

“I will have faith, as Teagan asked. Every night I will light a candle. I will light it with the little magick I have so that it shines for you, for Teagan, for Eamon.”

“I know you fear the power.”

“It’s my blood as well. You are mine as you were hers. This I will do, every sunset, and in the small light I’ll put my faith. Know it burns for you and yours. Know that, and be safe.”

“We will come back. In that I will have faith. We will come back, and you will hold the child now inside me.”

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THEY JOURNEYED ON, WITH A LITTLE SPOTTED PUP GIVEN the children with much ceremony, and with promises for a longer visit when they returned.

The air grew colder, the wind brisk.

More than once she heard Cabhan's voice, sly and seductive, trailing on that wind.

I wait.

She would see Teagan look out over the hills, or Eamon rubbing his fingers over his pendant—and know they heard as well.

When the hawk veered off, and Alastar strained to follow, Kathel leaped out of the wagon, trotted off on a fork in the road.

"It's not the way." Eoghan pulled his horse up by the wagon. "We would make Ashford by tomorrow, but that is not the way."

"No, not the way to Ashford, but the way we must go. Trust the guides, Eoghan. There's something we must do first. I feel it."

Eamon drew up on the other side. "Near home," he said. "All but near enough to taste. But we're called."

"Aye, we're called. So we answer." She reached out, touched her husband's arm. "We must."

"Then we will."

She didn't know the way, yet she did. With her mind linked with the hound's she knew the road, the turns, the hills. And oh, she felt him reaching out, that darkness, hungry and eager to take what she was, and more.

The hazy sun slid down toward the western hills, but still they rode. Her back ached from the hours in the wagon, and a thirst rose up in her. But they rode.

She saw the shadow of it in the oncoming dark—the rise of it with fields around. A place of worship, she thought, she could feel that.

And a place of power.

She stopped the wagon, breathed the air.

"He can't get through. It's too strong for him to push through."

"Something here," Eamon murmured.

"Something bright," Teagan said. "Strong and bright. And old."

"Before us." Grateful for the help, Brannaugh let her husband lift her from the wagon. "Before our mother. Before any time we know."

"A church." Gealbhan reached up to lift Teagan from the saddle. "But no one's here."

"They're here." Weary, Teagan leaned against him. "Those who came before us, those who sanctified this ground. They will not let him pass. This is a holy place."

"Tonight, this is ours." Brannaugh stepped forward, lifted her hands. "Gods of light, goddesses bright, we call to you across the night. By the power you have given, by the purpose we are driven, we seek your

blessing. A night within your walls before whatever fates befall, this respite, this resting. We are Sorcha's three. Dark witches come to thee. By thy will, so mote it be."

Light bloomed like sun, shining through the windows, the doors that opened with a wind like breath. And warmth poured out.

"We are welcome here." Smiling, she lifted her daughter, and all the fatigue from the long journey fell away. "We are welcome."

Brannaugh settled the children to sleep on pallets she made on the floor of the church. And was grateful to find both of them too weary to whine or argue, for her momentary energy already flagged.

"Do you hear them?" Eamon whispered.

"Even I hear them." Eoghan scanned the church, the stone walls, the wooden seats. "They sing."

"Aye." Gealbhan picked up the pup to soothe it. "Soft, lovely. As angels or gods might sing. This is a holy place."

"It offers more than sanctuary for the night." A hand pressed to her back, Brannaugh rose. "It offers the blessing, and the light. We were called by those who've come before us, to this place, on this night."

Teagan touched her fingers lightly, reverently, to the altar. "Built by a king for a kindness given. A promise kept. Built here near a pilgrim's walk. This abbey called Ballintubber."

She lifted her hands, smiled. "This much I see." She turned to her husband. "Aye, this is a holy place, and we'll seek the blessing of those who called us."

"Like the king," Brannaugh said, "we have a promise to keep. Eoghan, my love, would you fetch me my mother's book?"

"I will, aye—if you will sit. Just sit, Brannaugh. You're too pale."

"I'm weary, in truth, but I promise you this must be done, and we will all be better for it. Teagan—"

"I know what we need. I'll—"

"Sit," her brother insisted. "I'll get what we need, and the both of you will take your ease for a moment. Gealbhan, I swear by the gods, sit on the pair of them if they don't rest for a bit."

Gealbhan had only to touch his wife's cheek, to take Brannaugh's hand to have them heed. "What must be done?" he asked Teagan.

"An offering. An asking. A gathering. He cannot come here. Cabhan cannot come here, or see here. Here he has no power. And here, we can gather ours together."

"What do you need?"

"You are the best of us." She kissed his cheek. "If you would help Eamon, I promise you Brannaugh and I will bide here, will rest."

When he'd gone, she turned quickly to Brannaugh. "You have pain."

“It’s not the birthing pains. You’ll learn the babe often gives you a bit of a taste of what’s coming. This will pass. But the rest is welcome. What we will do here will take strength.”

They took an hour, to rest, to prepare.

“We must cast the circle,” she told Eoghan, “and make the offering. Do not fear for me.”

“Would you ask me not to breathe?”

“It is your love, your faith, and Gealbhan’s with yours we need.”

“Then you have it.”

They cast the circle, and the cauldron floated over the fire they made. Water flowed from Teagan’s hands into the cauldron. Brannaugh added herbs, Eamon crushed stones.

“These come from the home we made.”

“And these.” Teagan opened a pouch, poured in the precious. “From the home we seek. Small things, a dried flower, a pebble, a bit of bark.”

“More than gold or silver treasured. We offer to you. Here, a lock of hair from my firstborn.”

“A feather from my guide.” Eamon added it to the now bubbling cauldron.

“This charm my mother made me.”

“Ah, Teagan,” Brannaugh murmured.

“She would wish it.” Teagan added it to the offering.

“To you we give what we hold dear, and add to them this witch’s tear. And seal with blood this brew to show our hearts are true.”

And each with a sacred knife offered their blood, and with it the bubbling cauldron boiled and smoked.

“Father, mother, blood of our blood and bone of our bone, we orphans have faith forever shown. Grant us here in this holy place, in this holy hour the might and right of your power. With your gift we cannot fail and over Cabhan will prevail. Imbue us now, we witches three. As we will, so mote it be.”

The wind had stirred inside the walls. The candlelight gone brilliant. But at the final words the three spoke together, the wind whirled, the light flashed.

The voices that had murmured, rang out.

With her siblings Brannaugh clasped hands, with them she dropped to her knees.

It ripped through her, the light, the voices, the wind. And the power.

Then came silence.

She rose again, and with Teagan and Eamon turned.

“You were alight,” Eoghan said in wonder. “Like candles yourselves.”

“We are the three.” Teagan’s voice rose and echoed in the humming silence. “But there are many. Many before us, many who come after.”

“Their light is ours; ours is theirs.” Eamon lifted his arms, his sisters’ high. “We are the three, and we are one.”

Filled with light, fatigue vanished, suffused, Brannaugh smiled. “We are the three. We cast our light over the dark, we seek it out of its shadows. And we will prevail.”

“By our blood,” they said together, “we will prevail.”

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IN THE MORNING, IN THE SOFT LIGHT OF DAY, THEY SET OUT again. They traveled the road with green hills rising, with water shining blue under a welcoming sun. Toward the grand gray stones of Ashford they rode, where the gates were open for them, the bridge drawn down, and the sun shined bright over the water, over the land of their birth.

And so Sorcha’s children came home.

3

Winter 2013

BRANNA O’DWYER WOKE TO A GRAY, SOGGY, RELENTLESS rain. And wished for nothing more than to burrow in and sleep again. Mornings, she had always felt, came forever too soon. But like it or not, sleep was done, and with its leaving came a slow and steady craving for coffee.

Annoyed, as she was often annoyed by morning, she rose, pulled thick socks over her feet, drew a sweater over the thin T-shirt she’d slept in.

Through habit and an ingrained tidiness, she stirred up the bedroom fire so the licks of flame would cheer the room, and with her hound, Kathel, having his morning stretch on the hearthrug, she made her bed, added the mounds of pretty pillows that pleased her.

In her bath, she brushed out her long fall of black hair, then bundled it up. She had work, and plenty of it—after coffee. She frowned at herself in the mirror, considered doing a bit of a glamour, as the restless night surely showed. But didn’t see the point.

Instead, she walked back into the bedroom, gave Kathel a good rub to get his tail wagging.

“You were restless as well, weren’t you now? I heard you talking in your sleep. Did you hear the voices, my boy?”

They walked down together, quiet, as her house was full as it was too often these days. Her brother and Meara shared his bed, and her cousin Iona shared hers with Boyle.

Friends and family all. She loved them, and needed them. But God be sweet, she could’ve done with some

alone.

“They stay for me,” she told Kathel as they walked down the steps of the pretty cottage. “As if I can’t look after myself. Have I not put enough protection around what’s mine, and theirs, to hold off a dozen Cabhans?”

It had to stop, really, she decided, heading straight toward her lovely, lovely coffee machine. A man of Boyle McGrath’s size could hardly be comfortable in her cousin Iona’s little bed. She needed to nudge them along. In any case, there had been no sign nor shadow of Cabhan since Samhain.

“We almost had him. Bugger it, we nearly finished it.”

The spell, the potion, both so strong, she thought as she started the coffee. Hadn’t they worked on both hard and long? And the power, by the gods, the power had risen like a flood that night by Sorcha’s old cabin.

They’d hurt him, spilled his blood, sent him howling—wolf and man. And still . . .

Not done. He’d slipped through, and would be healing, would be gathering himself.

Not done, and at times she wondered if ever it would be.

She opened the door, and Kathel rushed out. Rain or no, the dog wanted his morning run. She stood in the open doorway, in the cold, frosty December air, looking toward the woods.

He waited, she knew, beyond them. In this time or in another, she couldn’t tell. But he would come again, and they must be ready.

But he wouldn’t come this morning.

She closed the door on the cold, stirred up the kitchen fire, added fuel so the scent of peat soothed. Pouring her coffee, she savored the first taste, and the short time of quiet and alone. And, a magick of its own, the coffee cleared her head, smoothed her mood.

We will prevail.

The voices, she remembered now. So many voices rising up, echoing out. Light and power and purpose. In sleep she’d felt it all. And that single voice, so clear, so sure.

We will prevail.

“We’ll pray you’re right about it.”

She turned.

The woman stood, a hand protectively over the mound of her belly, a thick shawl tied around a long dress of dark blue.

Almost a mirror, Branna thought, almost like peering into a glass. The hair, the eyes, the shape of the face.

“You’re Brannaugh of Sorcha. I know you from dreams.”

“Aye, and you, Branna of the clan O’Dwyer. I know you from dreams. You’re my blood.”

“I am. I am of the three.” Branna touched the amulet with its icon of the hound she was never without—just

as her counterpart did the same.

“Your brother came to us, with his woman, one night in Clare.”

“Connor, and Meara. She is a sister to me.” Now Branna touched her heart. “Here. You understand.”

“She saved my own brother from harm, shed blood for him. She is a sister to me as well.” With some wonder on her face, Sorcha’s Brannaugh looked around the kitchen. “What is this place?”

“My home. And yours for you are very welcome here. Will you sit? I would make you tea. This coffee I have would not be good for the baby.”

“It has a lovely scent. But only sit with me, cousin. Just sit for a moment. This is a wondrous place.”

Branna looked around her kitchen—tidy, lovely, as she’d designed it herself. And, she supposed, wondrous indeed to a woman from the thirteenth century.

“Progress,” she said as she sat at the kitchen table with her cousin. “It eases hours of work. Are you well?”

“I am, very well. My son comes soon. My third child. She reached out; Branna took her hand.

Heat and light, a merging of power very strong, very true.

“You will name him Ruarc, for he will be a champion.”

It brought a smile to her cousin’s face. “So I will.”

“On Samhain, we—the three and three more who are with us—battled Cabhan. Though we caused him harm, burned and bled him, we didn’t finish him. I saw you there. Your brother with a sword, your sister with a wand, you with a bow. You were not with child.”

“Samhain is yet a fortnight to come in my time. We came to you?”

“You did, at Sorcha’s cabin where we lured him, and in your time, as we shifted into it to try to trap him. We were close, but it wasn’t enough. My book—Sorcha’s book—I could show you the spell, the poison we conjured. You may—”

Brannaugh held up a hand, pressed the other to her side. “My son comes. And he pulls me back. But listen, there is a place, a holy place. An abbey. It sits in a field, a day’s travel south.”

“Ballintubber. Iona weds her Boyle there come spring. It is a holy place, a strong place.”

“He cannot go there, see there. It is sacred, and those who made us watch over it. They gave us, Sorcha’s three, their light, their hope and strength. When next you face down Cabhan, we will be with you. We will find a way. We will prevail. If it is not to be you, there will come another three. Believe, Branna of the O’Dwyers. Find the way.”

“I can do nothing else.”

“Love.” She gripped Branna’s hand hard. “Love, I have learned, is another guide. Trust your guides. Oh, he’s impatient. My child comes today. Be joyful, for he is another bright candle against the dark. Believe,” she said again, and vanished.

Branna rose, and with a thought lit a candle for the new light, the new life.

And with a sigh, accepted her alone was at an end.

So she started breakfast. She had a story to tell, and no one would want to hear it on an empty stomach. Believe, she thought—Well, she believed it was part of her lot in life to cook for an army on nearly a daily basis.

She swore an oath that when they'd sent Cabhan to hell she'd take a holiday, somewhere warm, sunny—where she wouldn't touch a pot, pan, or skillet for days on end.

She began to mix the batter for pancakes—a recipe new to her she'd wanted to try—and Meara came in.

Her friend was dressed for the day, a working day at the stables, in thick trousers, a warm sweater, sturdy boots. She'd braided back her bark brown hair, sent Branna a cautious look with her dark gypsy eyes.

“I promised I'd see to breakfast this morning.”

“I woke early, after a restless night. And have already had company this morning.”

“Someone's here?”

“Was here. Drag the others down, would you, so I'll tell my tale all at once.” She hesitated only a moment. “Best if Connor or Boyle rings up Fin, and asks if he'd come over as well.”

“It's Cabhan. Is he back?”

“He's coming, right enough, but no.”

“I'll get the others. Everyone's up, so it won't take long.”

With a nod, Branna set bacon sizzling in a pan.

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Fabulous Finish to the Trilogy

By Sheila M

BLOOD MAGICK concludes the trilogy of books about the cousins O'Dwyer. It is the story of two people who have loved one another most of their lives and yet have been kept apart by evil hundreds of years old.

THE STORY: Branna O'Dwyer and Finbar Burke grew up together and dreamed of living their lives together. The two are witches who matched incredibly well. The first time they made love as teens, however, Fin was marked with the sign of Cabhan, the evil sorcerer who tried to kill Branna's ancestor. The mark signifies that Fin is descendant from Cabhan. Branna broke things off with Fin because she knew that they could not be together when the evil that is Cabhan continues to stalk her family. Through the first two books of the series, Fin and Branna worked together as the people in their lives intertwined. In this book, the three cousins joined by those who love them, plot the final confrontation with Cabhan that will free them all.

OPINION: This was my favorite book of the series. Branna and Fin have loved each other even though they have been kept apart by the evils of Cabhan and the curse of Branna's ancestor. The pain and angst of these

two who love each other and yet know that they cannot be together is beautifully written. At the same time, there is such rightness in the two being together that I had to keep reading every page wondering how the two would work out the problems facing them.

I especially liked that there were no false conflicts set between Fin and Branna. The only thing keeping them apart in this book is the external forces. There is no doubt that they have loved each other through the twelve years of their separation despite the fact that each has gone on to live their lives. The truth and strength of the love of two people who cannot see a way to be together permeates the story.

I also really enjoyed that both characters are strong, but not brittle. They have deep vulnerabilities to each other and to their friends and family, but they use the love that binds all of them. In the end, it is the love that is their greatest strength. The book is about the connections that bind us to others and the strength that comes from opening oneself up to that love.

The story ended as one might expect and yet the journey was deeply satisfying and I am happy to recommend this book.

WORTH MENTIONING: Roberts has a special touch with her witchcraft books. The book is informative and respectful without being preachy or shrill. The subject matter may be paranormal and yet these characters are deeply grounded in reality in so many ways that the witchcraft angle feels real and solid instead of fanciful.

FINAL DECISION: This is my favorite book of the series. I think it is a definite read for those who have followed the trilogy, but I think that it is best as part of that trilogy.

CONNECTED BOOK: BLOOD MAGICK is the third and final book in the Cousins O'Dwyer series. The book can be read on its own, but the story of Cabhan and in fact, the story of Branna and Fin have been a part of all three books and I must recommend that readers start with the first book in the series, DARK WITCH, and continue with SHADOW SPELL in order to fully appreciate the story.

STAR RATING: I give this book 5 stars!

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Do wolves wear jewelry?

By Kindle Customer

Generally I love the atmosphere of Nora Roberts' books, and I did here as well. However, there were a few weird things that I just did not get about this story, and those weird things kind of pulled me out of the suspension of disbelief. For one thing, why is a wolf wearing a jewel? How exactly does that work? I have never seen a wolf wearing jewelry! I think they don't like to, it's too fussy for them generally. And why is that necessary? Can't the wolf be "evil" without wearing some sort of evil stone? Second, why does a wolf in a story always have to be evil? Just a pet peeve of mine, but it's such a cliché, and also unfair to wolves who have been nearly hunted to extinction over the centuries. I get that an "evil house finch" or something doesn't really have the same impact as an evil wolf, but...I don't know, it's kind of boring having another bloodthirsty wolf in a story. Third, I get that the love story is more interesting if there is some sort of barrier between the two lovers getting together, but in this case, I really didn't get why these two couldn't be together. I understand that there was a centuries old curse against Finn's blood line, and that Brannagh's family purpose is to fight that blood line, but there appeared to be no actual consequences to the two of them getting together. Sure, the one time when they were 18 or so and "did it," he got a supernaturally imposed tattoo. But, so what? In this book, they are sleeping together all over the place, and nothing happens. So...why

exactly can't they "be together?" They in fact, ARE together. And why exactly did she determine they could not have children together until the curse was over? They'd have two headed babies or something? At any rate, the hysteria that somehow the sky would fall if they were I guess, more together than they already were, seemed silly to me. The other thing I did not understand, was the whole business with the poison. I must admit, I had kind of started skimming by that point, but, why would a poison kill a demon? I understand that it could kill the evil wolf, since it has a physical body, or even the physical body of the evil dude himself, but were they trying to poison the demon itself? Since it is a non-physical being, why would that work, exactly? In the end, though, you know what I got from this book, mostly? I feel like it might be fun to make candles! I went on line and found some kits to do so. So, obviously that description of the candle-making was good enough to make me want to actually do it! And I'm pretty non-crafty. So, thanks!

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

good but some issues

By M. Dickinson

I enjoyed this trilogy but it bothered me that SO MANY of the plot details were so similar to her previous books--especially the Three Sisters trilogy. Do I recommend the series? Yes, but it isn't my favourite. I have read this in print version and have the audio books. The narration is fine but the same person doesn't narrate each book. Warning: below are mild spoilers for the general story line all 3 books.

Woman who doesn't know she is a witch joins 2 other witches to fight big evil (first book). Woman falls in love with non-witch good guy who totally accepts her being a witch. The most powerful female witch (3rd book) has unresolved former relationship with other male witch who isn't a true part of the 3-witch circle but is determined to win back the woman and help fight the big evil. As always, there are gardens in this series but less than some other books. Has horses, which was a prominent element in many of Nora's earlier books. The one thing I did REALLY like about this series and found to be unique is the connection to the original witches from hundreds of years ago in the family line and how their story is really explored. The story actually starts with them and goes on for a chapter or two in each book--really established this part of the tale. Then the characters from this past part show up more and more as the trilogy continues and I like that too. This element is involved in a minor way in the Three Sisters trilogy (metaphysical contact with the ancestral witches that started the family line) but this series really tells the tale and those witches are actually important characters in this series.

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From the Trade Paperback edition.

About the Author

Nora Roberts is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of more than 200 novels. She is also the author of the bestselling In Death series written under the pen name J. D. Robb. There are more than 500 million copies of her books in print.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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1

Summer 1276

ON A BRIGHT DAY AS SUMMER FADED, BRANNAUGH gathered herbs, flowers, foliage, all for salves and potions and teas. They came to her, neighbors, travelers, for their hopes and healings. They came to her, the Dark Witch, as once they'd come to her mother, with aches in body, in heart, in spirit, and paid with coin or service or trade.

So she and her brother, her sister, had built their lives in Clare, so far from their home in Mayo. Far from the cabin in the woods where they had lived, where their mother had died.

So she had built her life, more contented, more joyful than she'd believed possible since that terrible day

their mother had given them all but the dregs of her own power, had sent them away to be safe as she sacrificed herself.

All grief, Brannaugh thought now, all duty and fear as she'd done what was asked of her, as she'd led her younger brother and little sister away from home.

They'd left love, childhood, and all innocence behind.

Long years. The first few spent, as their mother had bid, with their cousin and her man—safe, tended, welcomed. But the time had come, as time does, to leave that nest, to embrace who and what they were, and would ever be.

The Dark Witches three.

Their duty, their purpose above all else? To destroy Cabhan, the dark sorcerer, the murderer of their father, Daithi the brave, of their mother, Sorcha. Cabhan, who had somehow survived the spell the dying Sorcha had cast.

But on such a bright day in summer's end, it all seemed so far away—the terrors of that last winter, the blood and death of that last spring.

Here, in the home she'd made, the air smelled of the rosemary in her basket, of the roses planted by her husband on the birth of their first child. The clouds puffed white as lambs across the blue meadow of the sky, and the woods, the little fields they'd cleared, as green as emeralds.

Her son, not yet three years, sat in a patch of sun and banged on the little drum his father had made him. He sang and hooted and beat with such joyous innocence her eyes burned from the love.

Her daughter, barely a year, slept clutching her favored rag doll while guarded by Kathel, their faithful hound.

And another son stirred and kicked in her womb.

From where she stood she could see the clearing, and the little cabin she, Eamon, and Teagan had built near to eight years before. Children, she thought now. They'd been but children who could not embrace childhood.

They lived there still, close. Eamon the loyal, so strong and true. Teagan, so kind and fair. So happy now, Brannaugh thought, and Teagan so in love with the man she'd married in the spring.

All so peaceful, she thought, despite Brin's banging and hooting. The cabin, the trees, the green hills with their dots of sheep, the gardens, the bright blue sky.

And it would have to end. It would have to end soon.

The time was coming—she felt it as sure as she felt the babe's kicks in her womb. The bright days would give way to the dark. The peace would end in blood and battle.

She touched the amulet with its symbol of a hound. The protection her mother had conjured with blood magicks. Soon, she thought, all too soon now, she would need that protection again.

She pressed a hand to the small of her back as it ached a bit, and saw her man riding toward home.

Eoghan, so handsome, so hers. Eyes as green as the hills, hair a raven's wing that curled to his shoulders. He rode tall and straight and easy on the sturdy chestnut mare, his voice lifted—as often it was—in song.

By the gods, he made her smile, he made her heart lift like a bird on the wing. She, who had been so sure there could be no love for her, no family but her blood, no life but her purpose, had fallen deeper than oceans for Eoghan of Clare.

Brin leaped up, began to run as fast as his little legs could manage, all the while calling.

“Da, Da, Da!”

Eoghan leaned down, scooped the boy up in the saddle. The laugh, the man's, the boy's mixed, flew toward her. Her eyes stung yet again. In that moment, she would have given all of her power, every drop given her, to spare them what was to come.

The baby she'd named for her mother whimpered, and Kathel stirred his old bones to let out a soft woof.

“I hear her.” Brannaugh set down her basket, moved over to lift her waking daughter, snuggled her in with kisses as Eoghan rode up beside her.

“Look here, would you, what I found on the road. Some little lost gypsy.”

“Ah well, I suppose we should keep him. It may be he'll clean up fine, then we can sell him at the market.”

“He might fetch us a good price.” Eoghan kissed the top of his giggling son's head. “Off you go, lad.”

“Ride, Da!” Brin turned his head, beseeched with big dark eyes. “Please! Ride!”

“A quick one, then I want me tea.” He winked at Brannaugh before setting off in a gallop that had the boy shouting with delight.

Brannaugh picked up her basket, shifted young Sorcha on her hip. “Come, old friend,” she said to Kathel. “It's time for your tonic.”

She moved to the pretty cottage Eoghan with his clever hands and strong back had built. Inside, she stirred the fire, settled her daughter, started the tea.

Stroking Kathel, she doused him with the tonic she'd conjured to keep him healthy and clear-eyed. Her guide, her heart, she thought, she could stretch his life a few years more. And would know when the time came to let him go.

But not yet, no, not yet.

She set out honey cakes, some jam, and had the tea ready when Eoghan and Brin came in, hand in hand.

“Well now, this is fine.”

He scrubbed Brin's head, leaned down to kiss Brannaugh, lingered over it as he always did.

“You're home early,” she began, then her mother's eye caught her son reaching for a cake. “Wash those hands first, my boy, then you'll sit like a gentleman for your tea.”

“They’re not dirty, Ma.” He held them out.

Brannaugh just lifted her eyebrows at the grubby little hands. “Wash. The both of you.”

“There’s no arguing with women,” Eoghan told Brin. “It’s a lesson you’ll learn. I finished the shed for the widow O’Brian. It’s God’s truth her boy is useless as teats on a billy goat, and wandered off to his own devices. The job went quicker without him.”

He spoke of his work as he helped his son dry his hands, spoke of work to come as he swung his daughter up, set her to squealing with delight.

“You’re the joy in this house,” she murmured. “You’re the light of it.”

He gave her a quiet look, set the baby down again. “You’re the heart of it. Sit down, off your feet awhile. Have your tea.”

He waited. Oh, she knew him for the most patient of men. Or the most stubborn, for one was often the same as the other, at least wrapped inside the like of her Eoghan.

So when the chores were finished, and supper done, when the children tucked up for the night, he took her hand.

“Will you walk out with me, lovely Brannaugh? For it’s a fine night.”

How often, she wondered, had he said those words to her when he wooed her—when she tried flicking him away like a gnat in the air?

Now, she simply got her shawl—a favorite Teagan had made her—wrapped it around her shoulders. She glanced at Kathel lying by the fire.

Watch the babes for me, she told him, and let Eoghan draw her out into the cool, damp night.

“Rain’s coming,” she said. “Before morning.”

“Then we’re lucky, aren’t we, to have the night.” He laid a hand over her belly. “All’s well?”

“It is. He’s a busy little man, always on the move. Much like his father.”

“We’re well set, Brannaugh. We could pay for a bit of help.”

She slanted him a look. “Do you have complaints about the state of the house, the children, the food on the table?”

“I don’t have a one, not for a single thing. I watched my mother work herself to bones.” As he spoke he rubbed the small of her back, as if he knew of the small, nagging ache there. “I wouldn’t have it of you, aghra.”

“I’m well, I promise you.”

“Why are you sad?”

“I’m not.” A lie, she realized, and she never lied to him. “A little. Carrying babies makes a woman a bit daft

from time to time, as you should know. Didn't I weep buckets when carrying Brin when you brought in the cradle you'd made? Wept as if the world was ending."

"From joy. This isn't joy."

"There is joy. Only today I stood here, looking at our children, feeling the next move in me, thinking of you, and of the life we have. Such joy, Eoghan. How many times did I say no to you when you asked me to be yours?"

"Once was too many."

She laughed, though the tears rose up in her throat. "But you would ask again, and again. You wooed me with song and story, with wildflowers. Still, I told you I would be no man's wife."

"None but mine."

"None but yours."

She breathed in the night, the scent of the gardens, the forest, the hills. She breathed in what had become home, knowing she would leave it for the home of childhood, and for destiny.

"You knew what I was, what I am. And still, you wanted me—not the power, but me."

Knowing that meant all the world to her, and knowing it had opened the heart she'd determined to keep locked.

"And when I could no longer stop myself from loving you, I told you all there is, all of it, refusing you again. But you asked again. Do you remember what you said to me?"

"I'll say it to you again." He turned to her, took her hands as he had on the day years before. "You're mine, and I am yours. All that you are, I'll take. All that I am, I'll give. I'll be with you, Brannaugh, Dark Witch of Mayo, through fire and flood, through joy and grief, through battle and through peace. Look in my heart, for you have that power. Look in me, and know love."

"And I did. And I do. Eoghan." She pressed against him, burrowed into him. "There is such joy."

But she wept.

He stroked, soothed, then eased her away to see her face in the pale moonlight. "We must go back. Go back to Mayo."

"Soon. Soon. I'm sorry—"

"No." He touched his lips to hers, stilled her words. "You will not say so to me. Did you not hear my words?"

"How could I know? Even when you spoke them, when I felt them capture my heart, how could I know I would feel like this? I would wish with all I am to stay, just stay. To be here with you, to leave all the rest behind and away. And I can't. I can't give us that. Eoghan, our children."

"Nothing will touch them." Again he laid a hand on her belly. "Nothing and no one. I swear it."

“You must swear it, for when the time comes I must leave them and face Cabhan with my brother and sister.”

“And with me.” He gripped her shoulders as fire and fierceness lit his eyes. “Whatever you face, I face.”

“You must swear.” Gently she drew his hands back down to her belly where their son kicked. “Our children, Eoghan, you must swear to protect them above all. You and Teagan’s man must protect them against Cabhan. I could never do what I must do unless I know their father and their uncle guard and protect them. As you love me, Eoghan, swear it.”

“I would give my life for you.” He rested his brow on hers, and she felt his struggle—man, husband, father. “I swear to you, I would give my life for our children. I will swear to protect them.”

“I am blessed in you.” She lifted his hands from her belly to her lips. “Blessed in you. You would not ask me to stay?”

“All that you are,” he reminded her. “You took an oath, and that oath is mine as well. I am with you, mo chroi.”

“You are the light in me.” On a sigh, she rested her head on his shoulder. “The light that shines in our children.”

She would use all she was to protect that light, all that came from it, and at last, at last, vanquish the dark.

• • •

SHE BIDED, TAKING EACH DAY, HOLDING IT CLOSE. WHEN HER children rested, when the one inside her insisted she rest as well, she sat by the fire with her mother’s spell book. Studied, added her own spells, her own words and thoughts. This, she knew, she would pass down as she passed the amulet. To her children, and to the child who came from her who would carry the purpose of the Dark Witch should she and Eamon, Teagan fail.

Their mother had sworn they—or their blood—would destroy Cabhan. She had seen, with her own eyes, one of their blood from another time, had spoken to him. And she dreamed of another, a woman with her name, who wore the amulet she wore now, who was, as she was, one of three.

Sorcha’s three would have children, and they would have children in turn. So the legacy would continue, and the purpose with it, until it was done. She would not, could not, turn away from it.

She would not, could not, turn away from the stirrings in her own blood as summer drew down.

But she had children to tend, a home to tend in turn, animals to feed and care for, a garden to harvest, the little goat to milk. Neighbors and travelers to heal and help.

And magicks, bright, bright magicks, to preserve.

So with her children napping—and oh, Brin had put up a battle heroic against closing his eyes—she stepped outside for a breath.

And saw her sister, her bright hair braided down her back, walking up the path with a basket.

“You must have heard me wishing for your company, for I’m after some conversation with someone more

than two years of age.”

“I’ve brown bread, for I baked more than enough. And I was yearning for you as well.”

“We’ll have some now, as I’m hungry every minute of every day.” Laughing, Brannaugh opened her arms to her sister.

Teagan, so pretty with her hair like sunlight, her eyes like the bluebells their mother had prized.

Brannaugh gathered her close—then immediately drew her back again.

“You’re with child!”

“And you couldn’t give me the chance to say so to you myself?” Glowing, beaming, Teagan grabbed hold for another strong embrace. “I was only just sure of it this morning. I waked, and I knew there was life in me. I haven’t told Gealbhan, for I needed first to tell you. And to be sure of it, absolutely sure. Now I am. I’m babbling like a brook. I can’t stop.”

“Teagan.” Brannaugh’s eyes welled as she kissed her sister’s cheeks, as she remembered the little girl who’d wept on that dark morning so long ago. “Blessed be, deirfiúr bheag. Come inside. I’ll make you some tea, something good for you and the life in you.”

“I want to tell Gealbhan,” she said as she went in with Brannaugh, took off her shawl. “By the little stream where he first kissed me. And then tell Eamon he’ll again be an uncle. I want music and happy voices. Will you and Eoghan bring the children this evening?”

“We will, of course, we will. We’ll have music and happy voices.”

“I miss Ma. Oh, it’s foolish, I know, but I want to tell her. I want to tell Da. I’m holding a life inside me, one that came from them. Was it so with you?”

“Aye, each time. When Brin came, and then my own Sorcha, I saw her for a moment, just for a moment. I felt her, and Da as well. I felt them there when my babes loosed their first cry. There was joy in that, Teagan, and sorrow. And then . . .”

“Tell me.”

Her gray eyes full of that joy, that sorrow, Brannaugh folded her hands over the child within her. “The love is so fierce, so full. That life that you hold, not in your womb, but in your arms? The love that comes over you? You think you know, then you do, and what you thought you knew is pale and weak against what is. I know what she felt for us now. What she and Da felt for us. You’ll know it.”

“Can it be more than this?” Teagan pressed a hand to her middle. “It feels so huge already.”

“It can. It will.” Brannaugh looked out at the trees, at the rioting gardens. And her eyes went to smoke.

“This son in you, he will not be the one, though he’ll be strong and quick to power. Nor will the son that comes from you after him. The daughter, the third, she is the next. She will be your one of the three. Fair like you, kind in her heart, quick in her mind. You will call her Ciara. One day she will wear the sign our mother made for you.”

Suddenly light-headed, Brannaugh sat. Teagan rushed over to her.

“I’m well; I’m fine. It came over me so quick I wasn’t ready. I’m a bit slower these days.” She patted Teagan’s hand.

“I never looked. I didn’t think to.”

“Why should you think to? You’ve a right simply to be happy. I wouldn’t have spoiled that for all the worlds.”

“You haven’t. How could you spoil anything by telling me I’ll have a son, and another, and a daughter? No, sit as you are. I’ll finish the tea.”

They both glanced toward the door as it opened.

“Sure he has the nose for fresh bread, has Eamon,” Teagan said as their brother walked in with his brown hair tousled, as always, around a heartbreakingly handsome face.

With a grin he sniffed the air like a hound. “I’ve a nose, for certain, but didn’t need it to make my way here. You’ve enough light swirling around the place to turn up the moon. If you’re after doing a spell so bright, you might’ve told me.”

“We weren’t conjuring. Only talking. We’re having a bit of a céili at the cabin this evening. And you can keep Brannaugh company when I leave, so I can have time to tell Gealbhan he’s to be a father.”

“As there’s bread fresh, I can— A father is it?” Eamon’s bold blue eyes filled with delight. “There’s some happy news.” He plucked Teagan off her feet, gave her a swing, then another when she laughed. He set her down in a chair, kissed her, then grinned at Brannaugh. “I’d do the same with you, but it’s like to break my back, as you’re big as a mountain.”

“Don’t think you’ll be adding my jam to that bread.”

“A beautiful mountain. One who’s already given me a handsome nephew and a charming niece.”

“That might get you a dollop.”

“Gealbhan will be overjoyed.” Gently, as he was always gentle with Teagan, he brushed his fingers down her cheek. “You’re well then, are you, Teagan?”

“I feel more than wonderful. I’m likely to cook a feast, which will suit you, won’t it?”

“It will, aye, it will.”

“And you need to be finding the woman to suit you,” Teagan added, “for you’d make a fine father.”

“I’m more than fine with the two of you providing the children so I can be the happy uncle.”

“She’s hair like fire, eyes like the sea in storms, and a shimmer of power of her own.” Brannaugh sat back, rubbing a hand over the mound of her belly. “It comes in waves these days. Some from him, I’m thinking—he’s impatient.” Then she smiled. “It’s good seeing the woman who’d take you, Eamon. Not just for a tumble, but for the fall.”

“I’m not after a woman. Or not one in particular.”

Teagan reached out, laid a hand on his. “You think, and always have, you’re not to have a woman, a wife, as you’ve sisters to protect. You’re wrong, and always have been. We are three, Eamon, and both of us as able as you. When you love, you’ll have no say in it.”

“Don’t be arguing with a woman who carries a child, especially a witch who does,” Brannaugh said lightly. “I never looked for love, but it found me. Teagan waited for it, and it found her. You can run from it, mo dearthair. But find you it will.”

“When we go home.” Her eyes filled again. “Ah, curse it, I’m watering up every time I take a breath it seems. This you have to look to, Teagan. The moods come and go as they will.”

“You felt it as well.” Now Eamon laid a hand on Brannaugh’s so the three were joined. “We’re going home, and soon.”

“At the next moon. We must leave on the next full moon.”

“I hoped it would wait,” Teagan murmured. “I hoped it would wait until you’re finished birthing, though I knew in my head and my heart it would not wait.”

“I will birth this son in Mayo. This child will be born at home. And yet . . . This is home as well. Not for you,” she said to Eamon. “You’ve waited, you’ve bided, you’ve stayed, but your heart, your mind, your spirit is ever there.”

“We were told we would go home again. So I waited. The three, the three that came from us. They wait as well.” Eamon ran his fingers over the blue stone he wore around his neck. “We’ll see them again.”

“I dream of them,” Brannaugh said. “Of the one who shares my name, and the others as well. They fought and they failed.”

“They will fight again,” Teagan said.

“They gave him pain.” A fierce light came into Eamon’s eyes. “He bled, as he bled when the woman named Meara, the one who came with Connor of the three, struck him with her sword.”

“He bled,” Brannaugh agreed. “And he healed. He gathers again. He pulls in power from the dark. I can’t see where, how, but feel only. I can’t see if we will change what’s to come, if we can and will end him. But I see them, and know if we cannot, they will fight again.”

“So we go home, and find the way. So they who come from us won’t fight alone.”

Brannaugh thought of her children, sleeping upstairs. Safe, innocent still. And the children of her children’s children, in another time, in Mayo. Neither safe, she thought, nor innocent.

“We will find the way. We will go home. But tonight, for tonight, we’ll feast. We’ll have music. And we three will give thanks to all who came before us for the light. For the lives,” she said, with a hand light on his sister’s belly, and one on her own.

“And tomorrow.” Eamon stood. “We begin to end what took the lives of our father, of our mother.”

“Will you bide with Brannaugh? I would speak with Gealbhan now.”

“Give him only the joy today.” Brannaugh rose with her sister. “Tomorrow is soon enough for the rest. Take

today for joy alone, for time is so short.”

“I will.” She kissed her sister, her brother. “Eoghan must bring his harp.”

“Be sure he will. We’ll fill the wood with music and send it flying over the hills.”

She sat again when Teagan left, and Eamon nudged her tea toward her. “Drink it. You’re pale.”

“A bit tired. Eoghan knows. I’ve talked with him, and he’s ready to leave—leave all he built here. I never thought it would be hard to go back. Never knew I would be torn in two ways.”

“Gealbhan’s brothers will tend the land here, for you and for Teagan.”

“Aye, and it’s a comfort. Not for you, the land here it’s never been for you.” Here again was sorrow and joy mixed into one. “You will stay in Mayo, whatever comes. I can’t see what we will do, Eoghan and I, the children. But Teagan will come back here, that I see clear. This is her place now.”

“It is,” he agreed. “She will ever be a dark witch of Mayo, but her home and heart are for Clare.”

“How will it be for us, Eamon, not to be together as we have been all our lives?”

His eyes, the wild blue of their father’s, looked deep into hers. “A distance in space means nothing. We are always together.”

“I’m weepy and foolish, and I dislike it very much. I hope this mood is a brief one or I might curse myself.”

“Well, you were given to tempers and sharp words toward the end of carrying young Sorcha. It may be I prefer the weeping.”

“I don’t, that’s for certain.” She drank the tea, knowing it would settle her. “I’ll add a bit more to the tonic I give Kathel and Alastar, for the journey. Roibeard does well without it yet. He’s strong.”

“He’s hunting now,” Eamon said of his hawk. “He goes farther each time. He goes north now, every day north. He knows, as we do, we’ll travel soon.”

“We will send word ahead. We will be welcome at Ashford Castle. The children of Sorcha and Daithi. The Dark Witches will be made welcome.”

“I’ll see to that.” He sat back with his own tea, smiled at her. “Hair like fire, is it?”

As he’d wanted, she laughed. “Oh, and you’ll be struck dumb and half blind, I promise you, when you meet.”

“Not I, my darling. Not I.”

2

FOR THE CHILDREN IT WAS AN ADVENTURE. THE IDEA OF a long journey, of the traveling to a new place—with the prize of a castle at the end of it, had Brin especially eager to go, to begin.

While Brannaugh packed what they’d need, she thought again of that long-ago morning, rushing to do her

mother's bidding, packing all she was told to pack. So urgent, she thought now, so final. And that last look at her mother, burning with the power left in her, outside the cabin in the woods.

Now she packed to go back, a duty, a destiny she'd always accepted. Eagerly wished for—until the birth of her first child, until that swamping flood of love for the boy who even now raced about all but feverish in his excitement.

But she had a task yet to face here.

She gathered what she needed—bowl, candle, book, the herbs and stones. And with a glance at her little boy, felt both pride and regret.

"It is time for him, for this," she told Eoghan.

Understanding, he kissed her forehead. "I'll take Sorcha up. It's time she was abed."

Nodding, she turned to Brin, called him.

"I'm not tired. Why can't we leave now and sleep under the stars?"

"We leave on the morrow, but first there are things we must do, you and I."

She sat, opened her arms. "First, come sit with me. My boy," she murmured, when he crawled onto her lap. "My heart. You know what I am."

"Ma," he said and cuddled into her.

"I am, but you know, as I've never hidden it from you, what I am besides. Dark witch, keeper of magicks, daughter of Sorcha and Daithi. This is my blood. This is your blood as well. See the candle?"

"You made the candle. Ma's make the candles and bake the cakes, and Da's ride the horses."

"Is that the way of it?" She laughed, and decided she'd let him have that illusion for a little while more. "Well, it's true enough I made the candle. See the wick, Brin? The wick is cold and without light. See the candle, Brin, see the wick. See the light and flame, the tiny flame, and the heat, the light to be. You have the light in you, the flame in you. See the wick, Brin."

She crooned it to him, over and over, felt his energy begin to settle, his thoughts begin to join with her.

"The light is power. The power is light. In you, of you, through you. Your blood, my blood, our blood, your light, my light, our light. Feel what lives in you, what waits in you. See the wick, it waits for your light. For your power. Bring it. Let it rise, slow, slow, gentle and clean. Reach for it, for it belongs to you. Reach, touch, rise. Bring the light."

The wick sparked, died away, sparked again, then burned true.

Brannaugh pressed a kiss to the top of his head. There, she thought, there, the first learned. And her boy would never be just a child again.

Joy and sorrow, forever entwined.

"That is well done."

He turned his face up, smiled at her. "Can I do another?"

"Aye," she said, kissed him again. "But heed me now, and well, for there is more to learn, more to know. And the first you must know, must heed, must vow is you harm none with what you are, what you have. Your gift, Brin? An' it harm none. Swear this to me, to yourself, to all who've come before, all who will come after."

She lifted her athame, used it on her palm. "A blood oath we make. Mother to son, son to mother, witch to witch."

Solemn-eyed, he held out his hand to her, blinked at the quick pain when she nicked it.

"An' it harm none," he said when she took his hand, mixed her blood with his.

"An' it harm none," she repeated, then gathered him close, kissed the little hurt, healed it. "Now, you may do another candle. And after, together, we will make charms, for protection. For you, for your sister, for your father."

"What of you, Ma?"

She touched her pendant. "I have what I need."

• • •

IN THE MORNING MISTS, SHE CLIMBED ONTO THE WAGON, her little girl bundled at her side. She looked at her boy, so flushed with delight in the saddle in front of his father. She looked at her sister, fair and quiet astride Alastar; her brother, their grandfather's sword at his side, tall and straight on the horse he called Mithra. And Gealbhan steady and waiting on the pretty mare Alastar had sired three summers before.

She clucked to Gealbhan's old plow horse, and with Brin letting out a whoop, began. She looked back once, just once at the house she'd come to love, asked herself if she would ever see it again.

Then, she looked ahead.

A healer found welcome wherever she went—as did a harpist. Though the baby heavy in her belly was often restless, she and her family found shelter and hospitality along the wild way.

Eoghan made music, she or Teagan or Eamon offered salves or potions to the ailing or the injured. Gealbhan offered his strong back and calloused hands.

One fine night they slept under the stars as Brin so wished, and there was comfort in knowing the hound, the hawk, the horse guarded what was hers.

They met no trouble along the way, but then she knew the word had gone about. The Dark Witches, all three, journeyed through Clare and on to Galway.

"The word would reach Cabhan as well," Eamon said as they paused in their travels to rest the horses, to let the children run free for a time.

She sat between him and Teagan while Gealbhan and Eoghan watered the horses and Eamon dropped a line into the water.

“We’re stronger than we were,” Teagan reminded him. “We journeyed south as children. We go north children no more.”

“He worries.” Brannaugh stroked her belly. “As you and I carry more than we did.”

“I don’t doubt your power or your will.”

“And still you worry.”

“I wonder if it must be now,” Eamon admitted, “even knowing it must be now. I feel it as both of you, and yet would be easier if there was time for both of you to have proper lyings-in before we face what we must face.”

“What’s meant is meant, but in truth I’m glad we’ll break our journey for a day or so with our cousins. And by all the gods I’ll be happy to have a day off that bloody wagon.”

“I’m dreaming of Ailish’s honey cakes, for no one has a finer hand with them.”

“Dreaming with his belly,” Teagan said.

“A man needs to eat. Hah!” He pulled up the line, and the wriggling fish who’d taken the hook. “And so we will.”

“You’ll need more than one,” Brannaugh said, and reminded them all of those same words their mother spoke on a fine and happy day on the river at home.

They left the rugged wilds of Clare, pushed by fierce winds, sudden driving rains. They rode through the green hills of Galway, by fields of bleating sheep, by cottages where smoke puffed from chimneys. Roibeard winged ahead, under and through layers of clouds that turned the sky into a soft gray sea.

The children napped in the wagon, tucked in among the bundles, so Kathel sat beside Brannaugh, ever alert.

“There are more cottages than I remember.” Teagan rode beside her on the tireless Alastar.

“The years pass.”

“It’s good land here—I can all but hear Gealbhan thinking it.”

“Would you plant yourself here then? Does it speak to you?”

“It does. But so does our cabin in the woods in Clare. And still, the closer we come to home, the more I ache for it. We had to put that aside for so long, all of us, but now . . . Do you feel it, Brannaugh? That call to home?”

“Aye.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Aye. Of what’s to come, but more of failing.”

“We won’t.” At Brannaugh’s sharp look, Teagan shook her head. “No, I’ve had no vision, but only a certainty. One that grows stronger as we come closer to home. We won’t fail, for light will always beat the

dark, though it take a thousand years.”

“You sound like her,” Brannaugh murmured. “Like our mother.”

“She’s in all of us, so we won’t fail. Oh, look, Brannaugh! That tree there with the twisted branches. It’s the very one Eamon told our cousin Mabh came to life each full moon, to scare her. We’re nearly to Ailish’s farm. We’re all but there.”

“Go on, ride ahead.”

Her face lit so she might’ve been a child again, Teagan tossed back her head and laughed. “So I will.”

She rode to her husband, let out a fresh laugh, then set off in a gallop. Beside Brannaugh, Kathel whined, quivered.

“Go on then.” Brannaugh gave him a stroke.

He leaped out of the wagon, raced behind the horse with the hawk flying above them.

It was a homecoming, for they’d lived on the farm for five years. Brannaugh found it as tidy as ever, with new outbuildings, a new paddock where young horses danced.

She saw a young boy with bright hair all but wrapped around Kathel. And knew when the boy smiled at her, he was Lughaidh, the youngest and last of her cousin’s brood.

Ailish herself rushed over to the wagon. She’d grown a bit rounder, and streaks of gray touched her own fair hair. But her eyes were as lively and young as ever.

“Brannaugh! Oh look at our Brannaugh! Seamus, come over and help your cousin down from the wagon.”

“I’m fine.” Brannaugh clambered down herself, embraced her cousin. “Oh, oh, it does my heart good to see you again.”

“And mine, seeing you. Oh, you’re a beauty, as ever. So like your mother. And here’s our Eamon, so handsome. My cousins, three, come back as you said you would. I’ve sent the twins off to get Bardan from the field, and Seamus, you run over and tell Mabh her cousins are here.”

Teary-eyed, she embraced Brannaugh again. “Mabh and her man have their own cottage, just across the way. She’s near ready to birth her first. I’m to be a granny! Oh, I can’t stop my tongue from wagging. It’s Eoghan, aye? And Teagan’s Gealbhan. Welcome, welcome all of you. But where are your children?”

“Asleep in the wagon.”

Nothing would do but for Ailish to gather them up, to ply them with the honey cakes Eamon remembered so fondly. Then Conall, who’d been but a babe in arms when last she’d seen him, took her children off to see a new litter of puppies.

“They’ll be fine, my word on it,” Ailish said as she poured out tea. “He’s a good lad, is Conall—one you helped bring into the world. We’ll let the men see to the horses and that, and you’ll both take your ease awhile.”

“Praise be.” Brannaugh sipped the tea, let it and the fire warm her, soothe her. “I’m sitting in a chair that’s

not moving.”

“Eat. You’ve another in you who needs the food as well.”

“I’m starving all the day and half the night. Teagan’s not as hungry—yet. But she will be.”

“Oh, are you carrying?” Delight glowed on her face as Ailish stopped her fussing with tea, laid her hands over her own heart. “My sweet little Teagan, to be a mother. The years, where do they go? You were but a babe yourself. Will you stay? Will you stay until your time comes?” she asked Brannaugh. “It’s still a distance to Mayo, and you’re close. I can see you’re close.”

“A day or two only, and so grateful for it. The babe will be born in Mayo. It’s meant. It’s what must be.”

“Must it?” Ailish gripped Brannaugh’s hand, then Teagan’s in turn. “Must it? You’ve made your lives in Clare. You’re women, mothers. Must you go back to the dark that waits?”

“We’re women, and mothers, and more. We can turn our back on none of it. But don’t fret, cousin. Don’t think of it. We have today, with tea and cakes and family.”

“We will come back again.” When they looked at her, Teagan pressed a hand to her heart. “I feel it so strong. We will come back again. Believe that. Believe in us. I think faith only makes us stronger.”

“If that’s so, you’ll have all of mine.”

They had music and feasting and family. And for a night and a day peace. Still Brannaugh found herself restless. Though her man slept in the bed Ailish had provided them, she sat by the fire.

Ailish came in, wearing her night-robles and a thick shawl.

“You need some of the tea you always made for me when I was so close to the end, and the babe so heavy in me I couldn’t sleep.”

“I look for her in the fire and smoke,” Brannaugh murmured. “I can’t help the looking, I miss her so. More as we near home. I miss my father; it’s an ache. But my mother is a kind of grieving that won’t end.”

“I know it.” Ailish sat beside her. “Does she come to you?”

“In dreams. There are moments, but only moments. I long to hear her voice, to have her tell me I’m doing right. That I’m doing what she’d want of me.”

“Oh, my love, you are. You are. Do you remember the day you left us?”

“I do. I hurt you by leaving.”

“Leaving always hurts, but it was what was right—I’ve come to know it. Before you left you told me of Lughaidh, the babe I carried. You said he must be the last, for neither I nor a babe would live through another birthing. And you gave me a potion to drink, every moon until the bottle was empty. So there would be no more children for me. It grieved me.”

“I know.” And knew it more poignantly now that she had her own children. “You are the best of mothers, and were one to me.”

“I would not have lived to see my children grown, to see my oldest girl ripe with her own child. To see, as you told me, Lughaidh, so bright and sweet, with a voice—as you said—like an angel.”

Nodding, Ailish studied the fire in turn, as if seeing that day again in the smoke and flame. “You laid protection over me and mine, gave me the years I might not have had. You are what she would want. Even as it grieves me that you will go, you will face Cabhan, I know you must. Never doubt she is proud of you. Never doubt, Brannaugh.”

“You comfort me, Ailish.”

“I will have faith, as Teagan asked. Every night I will light a candle. I will light it with the little magick I have so that it shines for you, for Teagan, for Eamon.”

“I know you fear the power.”

“It’s my blood as well. You are mine as you were hers. This I will do, every sunset, and in the small light I’ll put my faith. Know it burns for you and yours. Know that, and be safe.”

“We will come back. In that I will have faith. We will come back, and you will hold the child now inside me.”

• • •

THEY JOURNEYED ON, WITH A LITTLE SPOTTED PUP GIVEN the children with much ceremony, and with promises for a longer visit when they returned.

The air grew colder, the wind brisk.

More than once she heard Cabhan’s voice, sly and seductive, trailing on that wind.

I wait.

She would see Teagan look out over the hills, or Eamon rubbing his fingers over his pendant—and know they heard as well.

When the hawk veered off, and Alastar strained to follow, Kathel leaped out of the wagon, trotted off on a fork in the road.

“It’s not the way.” Eoghan pulled his horse up by the wagon. “We would make Ashford by tomorrow, but that is not the way.”

“No, not the way to Ashford, but the way we must go. Trust the guides, Eoghan. There’s something we must do first. I feel it.”

Eamon drew up on the other side. “Near home,” he said. “All but near enough to taste. But we’re called.”

“Aye, we’re called. So we answer.” She reached out, touched her husband’s arm. “We must.”

“Then we will.”

She didn’t know the way, yet she did. With her mind linked with the hound’s she knew the road, the turns, the hills. And oh, she felt him reaching out, that darkness, hungry and eager to take what she was, and more.

The hazy sun slid down toward the western hills, but still they rode. Her back ached from the hours in the wagon, and a thirst rose up in her. But they rode.

She saw the shadow of it in the oncoming dark—the rise of it with fields around. A place of worship, she thought, she could feel that.

And a place of power.

She stopped the wagon, breathed the air.

“He can’t get through. It’s too strong for him to push through.”

“Something here,” Eamon murmured.

“Something bright,” Teagan said. “Strong and bright. And old.”

“Before us.” Grateful for the help, Brannaugh let her husband lift her from the wagon. “Before our mother. Before any time we know.”

“A church.” Gealbhan reached up to lift Teagan from the saddle. “But no one’s here.”

“They’re here.” Weary, Teagan leaned against him. “Those who came before us, those who sanctified this ground. They will not let him pass. This is a holy place.”

“Tonight, this is ours.” Brannaugh stepped forward, lifted her hands. “Gods of light, goddesses bright, we call to you across the night. By the power you have given, by the purpose we are driven, we seek your blessing. A night within your walls before whatever fates befall, this respite, this resting. We are Sorcha’s three. Dark witches come to thee. By thy will, so mote it be.”

Light bloomed like sun, shining through the windows, the doors that opened with a wind like breath. And warmth poured out.

“We are welcome here.” Smiling, she lifted her daughter, and all the fatigue from the long journey fell away. “We are welcome.”

Brannaugh settled the children to sleep on pallets she made on the floor of the church. And was grateful to find both of them too weary to whine or argue, for her momentary energy already flagged.

“Do you hear them?” Eamon whispered.

“Even I hear them.” Eoghan scanned the church, the stone walls, the wooden seats. “They sing.”

“Aye.” Gealbhan picked up the pup to soothe it. “Soft, lovely. As angels or gods might sing. This is a holy place.”

“It offers more than sanctuary for the night.” A hand pressed to her back, Brannaugh rose. “It offers the blessing, and the light. We were called by those who’ve come before us, to this place, on this night.”

Teagan touched her fingers lightly, reverently, to the altar. “Built by a king for a kindness given. A promise kept. Built here near a pilgrim’s walk. This abbey called Ballintubber.”

She lifted her hands, smiled. “This much I see.” She turned to her husband. “Aye, this is a holy place, and

we'll seek the blessing of those who called us."

"Like the king," Brannaugh said, "we have a promise to keep. Eoghan, my love, would you fetch me my mother's book?"

"I will, aye—if you will sit. Just sit, Brannaugh. You're too pale."

"I'm weary, in truth, but I promise you this must be done, and we will all be better for it. Teagan—"

"I know what we need. I'll—"

"Sit," her brother insisted. "I'll get what we need, and the both of you will take your ease for a moment. Gealbhan, I swear by the gods, sit on the pair of them if they don't rest for a bit."

Gealbhan had only to touch his wife's cheek, to take Brannaugh's hand to have them heed. "What must be done?" he asked Teagan.

"An offering. An asking. A gathering. He cannot come here. Cabhan cannot come here, or see here. Here he has no power. And here, we can gather ours together."

"What do you need?"

"You are the best of us." She kissed his cheek. "If you would help Eamon, I promise you Brannaugh and I will bide here, will rest."

When he'd gone, she turned quickly to Brannaugh. "You have pain."

"It's not the birthing pains. You'll learn the babe often gives you a bit of a taste of what's coming. This will pass. But the rest is welcome. What we will do here will take strength."

They took an hour, to rest, to prepare.

"We must cast the circle," she told Eoghan, "and make the offering. Do not fear for me."

"Would you ask me not to breathe?"

"It is your love, your faith, and Gealbhan's with yours we need."

"Then you have it."

They cast the circle, and the cauldron floated over the fire they made. Water flowed from Teagan's hands into the cauldron. Brannaugh added herbs, Eamon crushed stones.

"These come from the home we made."

"And these." Teagan opened a pouch, poured in the precious. "From the home we seek. Small things, a dried flower, a pebble, a bit of bark."

"More than gold or silver treasured. We offer to you. Here, a lock of hair from my firstborn."

"A feather from my guide." Eamon added it to the now bubbling cauldron.

"This charm my mother made me."

“Ah, Teagan,” Brannaugh murmured.

“She would wish it.” Teagan added it to the offering.

“To you we give what we hold dear, and add to them this witch’s tear. And seal with blood this brew to show our hearts are true.”

And each with a sacred knife offered their blood, and with it the bubbling cauldron boiled and smoked.

“Father, mother, blood of our blood and bone of our bone, we orphans have faith forever shown. Grant us here in this holy place, in this holy hour the might and right of your power. With your gift we cannot fail and over Cabhan will prevail. Imbue us now, we witches three. As we will, so mote it be.”

The wind had stirred inside the walls. The candlelight gone brilliant. But at the final words the three spoke together, the wind whirled, the light flashed.

The voices that had murmured, rang out.

With her siblings Brannaugh clasped hands, with them she dropped to her knees.

It ripped through her, the light, the voices, the wind. And the power.

Then came silence.

She rose again, and with Teagan and Eamon turned.

“You were alight,” Eoghan said in wonder. “Like candles yourselves.”

“We are the three.” Teagan’s voice rose and echoed in the humming silence. “But there are many. Many before us, many who come after.”

“Their light is ours; ours is theirs.” Eamon lifted his arms, his sisters’ high. “We are the three, and we are one.”

Filled with light, fatigue vanished, suffused, Brannaugh smiled. “We are the three. We cast our light over the dark, we seek it out of its shadows. And we will prevail.”

“By our blood,” they said together, “we will prevail.”

• • •

IN THE MORNING, IN THE SOFT LIGHT OF DAY, THEY SET OUT again. They traveled the road with green hills rising, with water shining blue under a welcoming sun. Toward the grand gray stones of Ashford they rode, where the gates were open for them, the bridge drawn down, and the sun shined bright over the water, over the land of their birth.

And so Sorcha’s children came home.

BRANNA O'DWYER WOKE TO A GRAY, SOGGY, RELENTLESS rain. And wished for nothing more than to burrow in and sleep again. Mornings, she had always felt, came forever too soon. But like it or not, sleep was done, and with its leaving came a slow and steady craving for coffee.

Annoyed, as she was often annoyed by morning, she rose, pulled thick socks over her feet, drew a sweater over the thin T-shirt she'd slept in.

Through habit and an ingrained tidiness, she stirred up the bedroom fire so the licks of flame would cheer the room, and with her hound, Kathel, having his morning stretch on the hearthrug, she made her bed, added the mounds of pretty pillows that pleased her.

In her bath, she brushed out her long fall of black hair, then bundled it up. She had work, and plenty of it—after coffee. She frowned at herself in the mirror, considered doing a bit of a glamour, as the restless night surely showed. But didn't see the point.

Instead, she walked back into the bedroom, gave Kathel a good rub to get his tail wagging.

"You were restless as well, weren't you now? I heard you talking in your sleep. Did you hear the voices, my boy?"

They walked down together, quiet, as her house was full as it was too often these days. Her brother and Meara shared his bed, and her cousin Iona shared hers with Boyle.

Friends and family all. She loved them, and needed them. But God be sweet, she could've done with some alone.

"They stay for me," she told Kathel as they walked down the steps of the pretty cottage. "As if I can't look after myself. Have I not put enough protection around what's mine, and theirs, to hold off a dozen Cabhans?"

It had to stop, really, she decided, heading straight toward her lovely, lovely coffee machine. A man of Boyle McGrath's size could hardly be comfortable in her cousin Iona's little bed. She needed to nudge them along. In any case, there had been no sign nor shadow of Cabhan since Samhain.

"We almost had him. Bugger it, we nearly finished it."

The spell, the potion, both so strong, she thought as she started the coffee. Hadn't they worked on both hard and long? And the power, by the gods, the power had risen like a flood that night by Sorcha's old cabin.

They'd hurt him, spilled his blood, sent him howling—wolf and man. And still . . .

Not done. He'd slipped through, and would be healing, would be gathering himself.

Not done, and at times she wondered if ever it would be.

She opened the door, and Kathel rushed out. Rain or no, the dog wanted his morning run. She stood in the open doorway, in the cold, frosty December air, looking toward the woods.

He waited, she knew, beyond them. In this time or in another, she couldn't tell. But he would come again, and they must be ready.

But he wouldn't come this morning.

She closed the door on the cold, stirred up the kitchen fire, added fuel so the scent of peat soothed. Pouring her coffee, she savored the first taste, and the short time of quiet and alone. And, a magick of its own, the coffee cleared her head, smoothed her mood.

We will prevail.

The voices, she remembered now. So many voices rising up, echoing out. Light and power and purpose. In sleep she'd felt it all. And that single voice, so clear, so sure.

We will prevail.

"We'll pray you're right about it."

She turned.

The woman stood, a hand protectively over the mound of her belly, a thick shawl tied around a long dress of dark blue.

Almost a mirror, Branna thought, almost like peering into a glass. The hair, the eyes, the shape of the face.

"You're Brannaugh of Sorcha. I know you from dreams."

"Aye, and you, Branna of the clan O'Dwyer. I know you from dreams. You're my blood."

"I am. I am of the three." Branna touched the amulet with its icon of the hound she was never without—just as her counterpart did the same.

"Your brother came to us, with his woman, one night in Clare."

"Connor, and Meara. She is a sister to me." Now Branna touched her heart. "Here. You understand."

"She saved my own brother from harm, shed blood for him. She is a sister to me as well." With some wonder on her face, Sorcha's Brannaugh looked around the kitchen. "What is this place?"

"My home. And yours for you are very welcome here. Will you sit? I would make you tea. This coffee I have would not be good for the baby."

"It has a lovely scent. But only sit with me, cousin. Just sit for a moment. This is a wondrous place."

Branna looked around her kitchen—tidy, lovely, as she'd designed it herself. And, she supposed, wondrous indeed to a woman from the thirteenth century.

"Progress," she said as she sat at the kitchen table with her cousin. "It eases hours of work. Are you well?"

"I am, very well. My son comes soon. My third child. She reached out; Branna took her hand.

Heat and light, a merging of power very strong, very true.

"You will name him Ruarc, for he will be a champion."

It brought a smile to her cousin's face. "So I will."

"On Samhain, we—the three and three more who are with us—battled Cabhan. Though we caused him harm,

burned and bled him, we didn't finish him. I saw you there. Your brother with a sword, your sister with a wand, you with a bow. You were not with child."

"Samhain is yet a fortnight to come in my time. We came to you?"

"You did, at Sorcha's cabin where we lured him, and in your time, as we shifted into it to try to trap him. We were close, but it wasn't enough. My book—Sorcha's book—I could show you the spell, the poison we conjured. You may—"

Brannaugh held up a hand, pressed the other to her side. "My son comes. And he pulls me back. But listen, there is a place, a holy place. An abbey. It sits in a field, a day's travel south."

"Ballintubber. Iona weds her Boyle there come spring. It is a holy place, a strong place."

"He cannot go there, see there. It is sacred, and those who made us watch over it. They gave us, Sorcha's three, their light, their hope and strength. When next you face down Cabhan, we will be with you. We will find a way. We will prevail. If it is not to be you, there will come another three. Believe, Branna of the O'Dwyers. Find the way."

"I can do nothing else."

"Love." She gripped Branna's hand hard. "Love, I have learned, is another guide. Trust your guides. Oh, he's impatient. My child comes today. Be joyful, for he is another bright candle against the dark. Believe," she said again, and vanished.

Branna rose, and with a thought lit a candle for the new light, the new life.

And with a sigh, accepted her alone was at an end.

So she started breakfast. She had a story to tell, and no one would want to hear it on an empty stomach. Believe, she thought—Well, she believed it was part of her lot in life to cook for an army on nearly a daily basis.

She swore an oath that when they'd sent Cabhan to hell she'd take a holiday, somewhere warm, sunny—where she wouldn't touch a pot, pan, or skillet for days on end.

She began to mix the batter for pancakes—a recipe new to her she'd wanted to try—and Meara came in.

Her friend was dressed for the day, a working day at the stables, in thick trousers, a warm sweater, sturdy boots. She'd braided back her bark brown hair, sent Branna a cautious look with her dark gypsy eyes.

"I promised I'd see to breakfast this morning."

"I woke early, after a restless night. And have already had company this morning."

"Someone's here?"

"Was here. Drag the others down, would you, so I'll tell my tale all at once." She hesitated only a moment.

"Best if Connor or Boyle rings up Fin, and asks if he'd come over as well."

"It's Cabhan. Is he back?"

“He’s coming, right enough, but no.”

“I’ll get the others. Everyone’s up, so it won’t take long.”

With a nod, Branna set bacon sizzling in a pan.

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