

ONE



You're a difficult woman to find, Ms. Lane," said Inspector O'Duffy as I opened the diamond-paned front door of Barrons Books and Baubles.

The stately old-world bookstore was my home away from home, whether I liked it or not, and despite the sumptuous furnishings, priceless rugs, and endless selection of top-rate reading material, I didn't. The comfiest cage is still a cage.

He glanced at me sharply when I stepped around the door, into full view, noting my splinted arm and fingers, the stitches in my lip, and the fading purple and yellow bruises that began around my right eye and extended to the base of my jaw. Though he raised a brow, he made no comment.

The weather outside was awful, and so long as the door was open, I was too close to it. It had been raining for days, a relentless, depressing torrent that needled me with sharp wind-driven droplets even where I stood, tucked beneath the shelter of the column-flanked archway of the bookstore's grand

entry. At eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, it was so overcast and dark that the streetlamps were still on. Despite their sullen yellow glares, I could barely see the outlines of the shops across the street through the thick, soupy fog.

I backed up to let the inspector enter. Gusts of chilly air stepped in on his heels.

I closed the door and returned to the conversation area near the fire where I'd been wrapped in an afghan on the sofa, reading. My borrowed bedroom is on the top floor, but when the bookstore is closed on weekends I make the first floor, with its cozy reading nooks and enameled fireplaces, my personal parlor. My taste in reading material has become a bit eccentric of late. Acutely aware of O'Duffy on my heels, I surreptitiously toed a few of the more bizarre titles I'd been perusing beneath a handsome curio cabinet. *The Wee People: Fairy Tale or Fact?* was chased by *Vampires for Dummies* and *Divine Power: A History of Holy Relics*.

"Dreadful weather," he observed, stepping to the hearth and warming his hands before the softly hissing gas flames.

I agreed with perhaps more enthusiasm than the fact warranted, but the endless deluge outside was getting to me. A few more days of this and I was going to start building an ark. I'd heard it rained a lot in Ireland, but "constantly" was a smidge more than a lot, in my book. Transplanted against my will, a homesick, reluctant tourist, I'd made the mistake of checking the weather back home in Ashford this morning. It was a sultry, blue-skied ninety-six degrees in Georgia—just another perfect, blossom-

drenched, sunny day in the Deep South. In a few hours my girlfriends would be heading up to one of our favorite lakes where they would soak up the sun, scope out datable guys, and flip through the latest fashion magazines.

Here in Dublin it was a whopping fifty degrees and so darned wet it felt like half that.

No sun. No datable guys. And my only fashion concern was making sure my clothes were baggy enough to accommodate weapons concealed beneath them. Even in the relative security of the bookstore, I was carrying two flashlights, a pair of scissors, and a lethal, foot-long spearhead, tip neatly cased in a ball of foil. I'd scattered dozens more flashlights and assorted items that might second as arsenal throughout the four-story bookstore. I'd also secreted a few crosses and bottles of holy water in various nooks. Barrons would laugh at me if he knew.

You might wonder if I'm expecting an army from Hell.

I am.

"How *did* you find me?" I asked the inspector. When I'd last spoken to the Garda a week ago, he'd pressed for a way to reach me. I'd given him my old address at the Clarin House where I boarded for a short time when I first arrived. I don't know why. I guess I just don't trust anyone. Not even the police. Over here the good guys and the bad guys all look the same. Just ask my dead sister, Alina, victim of one of the most beautiful men I've ever seen—the Lord Master—who also happens to be one of the most evil.

"I'm a detective, Ms. Lane," O'Duffy told me with a dry smile, and I realized he had no intention of telling me. The smile vanished and his eyes narrowed with a subtle warning: *Don't lie to me, I'll know.*

I wasn't worried. Barrons said the same thing to me once, and he has seriously preternatural senses. If Barrons didn't see through me, O'Duffy wasn't going to. I waited, wondering what had brought him here. He'd made it clear he considered my sister's case unsolvable and closed. Permanently.

He moved away from the fire and dropped the satchel slung over his shoulder onto the table between us.

Maps spilled across the gleaming wood.

Though I betrayed nothing, I felt the cold blade of a chill at my spine. I could no longer see maps as I once had: innocuous travel guides for the disoriented traveler or bemused tourist. Now when I unfold one I half expect to find charred holes in it where the Dark Zones are—those chunks of our cities that have fallen off our maps, lost to the deadly Shades. It's no longer what maps show but what they *fail* to show that worries me.

A week ago I'd demanded O'Duffy tell me everything he knew about the clue my sister had left at the scene of her murder, words she'd scratched into the cobbled stone of the alley as she lay dying:
1247 LaRuhe.

He'd told me they'd never been able to find any such address.

I had.

It had taken a bit of thinking outside the box, but

that's something I'm getting better at every day, although I really can't take much credit for the improvement. It's easy to think outside the box when life has dropped a two-ton elephant on yours. What is that box anyway but the beliefs we choose to hold about the world that make us feel safe? My box was now as flat, and about as useful, as a tissue-paper umbrella in all this rain.

O'Duffy sat down on the sofa next to me, gently, for such an overweight man. "I know what you think of me," he said.

When I would have protested politely—good southern manners die hard, if at all—he gave me what my mother calls the "shush wave."

"I've been doing this job for twenty-two years, Ms. Lane. I know what the families of closed murder cases feel when they look at me. Pain. Anger." He gave a dry laugh. "The conviction that I must be a chuffing idiot who spends too much time in the pubs and not enough time on the job, or their loved one would be resting in vindicated peace while the perp rotted in jail."

Rotting in jail was far too kind a fate for my sister's murderer. Besides, I wasn't sure any jail cell could hold him. The crimson-robed leader of the Unseelie might draw symbols on the floor, stamp his staff, and disappear through a convenient portal. Though Barrons had cautioned against assumptions, I saw no reason to doubt the Lord Master was responsible for my sister's death.

O'Duffy paused, perhaps giving me a chance to rebut. I didn't. He was right. I'd felt all that and more, but weighing the jelly stains on his tie and the

girth overhanging his belt as circumstantial evidence, I'd convicted him of loitering overlong in bakeries and cafés, not pubs.

He selected two maps of Dublin from the table and handed them to me.

I gave him a quizzical look.

"The one on top is from last year. The one beneath it was published seven years earlier."

I shrugged. "And?" A few weeks ago I would have been delighted for any help from the Garda I could get. Now that I knew what I knew about the Dark Zone neighboring Barrons Books and Baubles—that terrible wasteland where I'd found 1247 LaRuhe, had a violent confrontation with the Lord Master, and nearly been killed—I wanted the police to stay as far out of my life as I could keep them. I didn't want any more deaths on my conscience. There was nothing the Garda could do to help me anyway. Only a *sidhe*-seer could see the monsters that had taken over the abandoned neighborhood and turned it into a death trap. The average human wouldn't know they were in danger until they were knee-deep in dead.

"I found your 1247 LaRuhe, Ms. Lane. It's on the map published seven years ago. Oddly enough, it's *not* on the one published last year. Grand Walk, one block down from this bookstore, isn't on the new map, either. Neither is Connelly Street, a block beyond that. I know. I went down there before I came to see you."

Oh, God, he'd walked into the Dark Zone this morning? The day was barely bright enough to keep the Shades hunkered down wherever it was the

nasty things hide! If the storm had blown in even one more dense, sky-obliterating cloud, the boldest of those life-suckers might have dared the day for a human Happy Meal. O'Duffy had just been waltzing cheek-to-cheek with Death, and didn't even know it!

The unsuspecting inspector waved a hand at the pile of maps. They looked well examined. One of them appeared to have been balled up in shock or perhaps angry disbelief, then re-smoothed. I was no stranger to those emotions. "In fact, Ms. Lane," O'Duffy continued, "none of the streets I just mentioned are on *any* recently published map."

I gave him my best blank look. "What are you saying, Inspector? Has the city renamed the streets in this part of Dublin? Is that why they're not on the new maps?"

His face tightened and his gaze cut away. "Nobody renamed the streets," he growled. "Unless they did it without notifying a single person in authority." He looked back at me, hard. "I thought there might be something else you wanted to tell me, Ms. Lane. Something that might sound... a bit... unusual?"

I saw it then, in his eyes. Something had happened to the inspector recently that had drastically changed his paradigm. I had no idea what had shaken the hard-boiled, overworked, fact-finding detective from his pragmatic view of the world but he, too, was now thinking outside his box.

I needed him back inside his box—ASAP. Outside the box in this city was a dangerous place to be.

I thought fast. I didn't have much to work with.

"Inspector," I said, sweetening and softening my Georgia drawl, "putting on the southern," as we call it back home, a sort of verbal honey-butter that masks the unpalatable taste of whatever we're slathering it on, "I know you must think me a complete idiot, coming over here and questioning your investigative techniques when anyone can see you're the expert in the field and I don't have an ounce of training in detecting matters, and I appreciate how patient you've been with me, but I no longer have any concerns about your investigation into my sister's death. I know now that you did everything you could to solve her case. I meant to stop by and speak with you before I left, but... well, the truth is I was feeling a bit embarrassed about our previous encounters. I went back to the alley the other day and took a good look around, without crying and letting my emotions get away from me, and I realized that my sister didn't leave me any clues. It was grief and anger and a whole boatload of wishful thinking on my part. Whatever was scratched into that alley had been done years ago."

"Whatever was scratched into that alley?" O'Duffy repeated carefully, and I knew he was recalling how adamant I'd been only last week about *exactly* what was scratched into that alley.

"Really, I could barely make it out at all. It might have been anything."

"Is that so, Ms. Lane?"

"Yes. And I meant to tell you it wasn't her cosmetic bag, either. I got that mixed up, too. Mom said she gave Alina the silver one and it wasn't quilted. Mom wanted us to be able to tell them apart. We

were forever arguing over whose was what and what was whose. The fact is I was grasping at straws and I'm sorry I wasted your time. You were right when you told me I should pack up, go home, and help my family get through these difficult times."

"I see," he said slowly, and I was afraid he really did—right through me.

Didn't overworked, underpaid civil servants only grease squeaky wheels? I wasn't squeaking anymore, so why wasn't he getting the message and holstering his oilcan? Alina's case had been closed before I'd come over, he'd refused to reopen it, and I'd be darned if he was reopening it now. He'd get himself killed!

I abandoned the oversweetened drawl. "Look, Inspector, what I'm saying is that I've given up. I'm not asking you or anyone else to continue the investigation. I know your department is overloaded. I know there are no leads. I know it's unsolved and I accept that my sister's case is closed."

"How . . . suddenly mature of you, Ms. Lane."

"A sister's death can make a girl grow up fast." That much was true.

"I guess that means you'll be flying home soon, then."

"Tomorrow," I lied.

"What airline?"

"Continental."

"What flight?"

"I can never remember. I've got it written down somewhere. Upstairs."

"What time?"

"Eleven thirty-five."

"Who beat you?"

I blinked, fumbling for an answer. I could hardly say I stabbed a vampire and he tried to kill me. "I fell. On the stairs."

"Got to be careful there. Stairs can be tricky." He looked around the room. "Which stairs?"

"They're in the back."

"How did you bang up your face? Hit the banister?"

"Uh-huh."

"Who's Barrons?"

"What?"

"This store is called Barrons Books and Baubles. I wasn't able to find anything in public records about an owner, dates of sale for the building, or even a business license. In fact, although this address shows on my maps, to all intents and purposes, the building doesn't exist. So, who's Barrons?"

"I'm the owner of this bookstore. Why?"

I jerked, stifling a gasp. Sneaky man. He was standing right behind us, the epitome of stillness, one hand on the back of the sofa, dark hair slicked back from his face, his expression arrogant and cold. No surprise there. Barrons *is* arrogant and cold. He's also wealthy, strong, brilliant, and a walking enigma. Most women seem to find him drop-dead sexy, too. Thankfully I'm not most women. I don't get off on danger. I get off on a man with strong moral fiber. The closest Barrons ever gets to fiber is walking down the cereal aisle at the grocery store.

I wondered how long he'd been there. With him you never know.

The inspector stood, looking mildly rattled. He

took in Barron's size, his steel-toed boots, the hardwood floors. Jericho Barrons is a tall, powerfully built man. I knew O'Duffy was wondering how he could have failed to hear him approach. I no longer waste time wondering about that sort of thing. In fact, so long as he keeps watching my back, I'll continue to ignore the fact that Barrons doesn't seem to be governed by the natural laws of physics.

"I'd like to see some identification," growled the inspector.

I fully expected Barrons to toss O'Duffy from the shop on his ear. He had no legal compulsion to comply and Barrons doesn't suffer fools lightly. In fact, he doesn't suffer them at all, except me, and that's only because he needs me to help him find the *Sinsar Dubh*. Not that I'm a fool. If I've been guilty of anything, it's having the blithely sunny disposition of someone who enjoyed a happy childhood, loving parents, and long summers of lazy-paddling ceiling fans and small-town drama in the Deep South which—while it's great—doesn't do a thing to prepare you for life beyond that.

Barrons gave the inspector a wolfish smile. "Certainly." He removed a wallet from the inner pocket of his suit. He held it out but didn't let go. "And yours, Inspector."

O'Duffy's jaw tightened but he complied.

As the men swapped identifications, I sidled closer to O'Duffy so I could peer into Barrons' wallet.

Would wonders never cease? Just like a real person, he had a driver's license. Hair: black. Eyes: brown. Height: 6' 3". Weight: 245. His birthday—was he kidding?—Halloween. He was thirty-one years

old and his middle initial was Z. I doubted he was an organ donor.

"You've a box in Galway as your address, Mr. Barrons. Is that where you were born?"

I'd once asked Barrons about his lineage, he'd told me Pict and Basque. Galway was in Ireland, a few hours west of Dublin.

"No."

"Where?"

"Scotland."

"You don't sound Scottish."

"You don't sound Irish. Yet here you are, policing Ireland. But then the English have been trying to cram their laws down their neighbors' throats for centuries, haven't they, Inspector?"

O'Duffy had an eye tic. I hadn't noticed it before. "How long have you been in Dublin?"

"A few years. You?"

"I'm the one asking the questions."

"Only because I'm standing here letting you."

"I can take you down to the station. Would you prefer that?"

"Try." The one word dared the Garda to try, by fair means or foul. The accompanying smile guaranteed failure. I wondered what he'd do if the inspector attempted it. My inscrutable host seems to possess a bottomless bag of tricks.

O'Duffy held Barrons' gaze longer than I expected him to. I wanted to tell him there was no shame in looking away. Barrons has something the rest of us don't have. I don't know what it is, but I feel it all the time, especially when we're standing close. Beneath the expensive clothes, unplaceable

accent, and cultured veneer, there's something that never crawled all the way out of the swamp. It didn't want to. It likes it there.

The inspector apparently deemed an exchange of information the wisest, or maybe just the easiest course. "I've been in Dublin since I was twelve. When my father died, my mother remarried an Irishman. There's a man over at Chester's says he knows you, Mr. Barrons. Name's Ryodan. Ring a bell?"

"Ms. Lane, go upstairs," Barrons said, instantly, softly.

"I'm perfectly fine here." Who was Ryodan and what didn't Barrons want me to know?

"Up. Stairs. Now."

I scowled. I didn't have to look at O'Duffy to know he was regarding me with acute interest—and pity. He was thinking Barrons was the name of the flight of stairs I'd fallen down. I hate pity. Sympathy isn't quite as bad. Sympathy says, I know how it feels, doesn't it just suck? Pity means they think you're defeated.

"He doesn't beat me," I said irritably. "I'd kill him if he did."

"She would. She has a temper. Stubborn, too. But we're working on that, aren't we, Ms. Lane?" Barrons turned his wolf smile on me, and jerked his head up toward the ceiling.

Someday I'm going to push Jericho Barrons as far as I can and see what happens. But I'm going to wait awhile, until I'm stronger. Until I'm pretty sure I've got a trump card.

I may have been forced into this war, but I'm learning to choose my battles.

I didn't see Barrons for the rest of the day.

A dutiful soldier, I retreated to the ditches as ordered and hunkered down there. In those ditches, I had an epiphany. People treat you as badly as you let them treat you.

Key word there: let.

Some people are exceptions, mostly parents, best friends, and spouses, though in my bartending job at The Brickyard, I've seen married people do worse things to each other in public than I'd do in private to someone I couldn't stand. Bottom line is most of the world will push you as far as you let them. Barrons might have sent me to my room, but *I'm* the idiot that went. What was I afraid of? That he'd hurt me, kill me? Hardly. He'd saved my life last week. He needed me. Why had I let him intimidate me?

I was disgusted with myself. I was still behaving like MacKayla Lane, part-time bartender, part-time sun-worshipper, and full-time glamour girl. My recent brush with death had made it clear that chick wasn't going to survive over here, a statement emphatically punctuated by ten unpolished, broken fingernails. Unfortunately, by the time I had my epiphany and stormed back downstairs, Barrons and the inspector were gone.

Worsening my already foul mood, the woman who runs the bookstore and carries a major torch for Barrons had arrived. Stunning, voluptuous, in her early fifties, Fiona doesn't like me at all. I suspect if

she knew Barrons kissed me last week she'd like me even less. I was nearly unconscious when he did it, but I remember. It's been impossible to forget.

When she looked up from the numbers she was punching in on her cell phone, I decided maybe she *did* know. Her eyes were venomous, her mouth a moue fanned by delicate wrinkles. With each quick, shallow inhalation, her lacy blouse trembled over her full bosom, as if she'd just dashed somewhere in a great hurry, or was suffering great distress. "What was Jericho doing here today?" she asked in a pinched tone. "It's Sunday. He's not supposed to be here on Sunday. I can't imagine any reason for him to stop by." She scanned me from head to toe, looking, I think, for signs of a recent tryst: tousled hair, perhaps a missed button on my blouse, or panties overlooked in the haste of dressing, left bunched in the leg of my jeans. I did that once. Alina saved me before Mom caught me.

I almost laughed. A tryst with Barrons? Get real.

"What are *you* doing here?" I countered. No more good little soldier. The bookstore was closed and neither of them should have been here, raining on my already rainy parade.

"I was on my way to the butcher when I saw Jericho stepping out," she said tightly. "How long was he here? Where were you just now? What were the two of you doing before I came?" Jealousy so vibrantly colored her words I expected her breath to come out in little green puffs. As if conjured by the unspoken accusation that we'd been doing the dirty, a vision of Jericho Barrons naked—dark, despotic,

and probably flat-out ferocious in bed—flashed through my mind.

I found it staggeringly erotic. Disturbed, I performed a hasty mental calendar count. I was ovulating. That explained it. I get indiscriminately horny for three days when I am: the day before, the day of, and the day after; Mother Nature's sneaky little way of ensuring survival of the human race, I guess. I check out guys I wouldn't normally look at, especially ones in tight jeans. I catch myself trying to decide if they're lefties or righties. Alina used to laugh and say if you can't tell, Junior, you don't want to know.

Alina. God, I missed her.

"Nothing, Fiona," I said. "I was upstairs."

She stabbed a finger at me, her eyes dangerously bright, and I was suddenly afraid she would cry. If she cried I'd lose all backbone. I can't stand older women crying. I see my mom in every one.

I was relieved when she snarled at me instead. "Do you think he healed your wounds because you matter to him? Do you think he cares? You mean nothing to him! You couldn't possibly understand that man and his moods. His needs. His desires. You're a stupid, selfish, naïve child," she hissed. "Go home!"

"I'd *love* to go home," I shot back. "Unfortunately, I don't have that choice!"

She opened her mouth but I didn't catch what she was saying because I'd already turned and was banging through the connecting doors to the private residence part of the store, in no mood to get dragged any further into the argument she was

spoiling to have. I left her shouting something about how she didn't have choices, either.

I went upstairs. Yesterday Barrons had told me to lose the splints. I'd told him bones didn't heal that fast, but my arm was itching like crazy again, so I went in the bathroom adjoining my bedroom and took it off.

I gingerly wiggled my wrist then flexed my hand. My arm had obviously never been broken, probably just sprained. It felt whole, stronger than ever. I peeled off the finger splints to find they were better than fine, too. There was a faint smudge of red and black on my forearm, like a smear of ink. While I rinsed it off, I turned my face from side to side in the mirror, wishing my bruises would heal as quickly. I'd spent most of my life as an attractive blonde. Now, a badly battered girl with short black hair stared back at me.

I turned away.

While I'd convalesced, Barrons had gotten me one of those little refrigerators college kids use in dorms, and stocked me up on snacks. I popped open a soda and sprawled across the bed. I read and surfed the Net the rest of the day, trying to educate myself on all the paranormal stuff I'd spent the first twenty-two years of my life belittling and ignoring.

For a week now, I'd been waiting for the army from Hell to come. I wasn't stupid enough to believe this little lull was anything but the calm before the storm.

Was Mallucé really dead? Though I'd stabbed the citron-eyed vampire during my aborted showdown with the Lord Master, and the last thing I'd seen

before losing consciousness from the injuries he'd dished out in retaliation was Barrons slamming him into a wall, I wasn't convinced of his demise and wouldn't be, until I heard something from the empty-eyed worshippers that stuffed the vamp's Goth mansion to overflowing on the south side of Dublin. In the Lord Master's employ—while two-timing and withholding powerful relics from the Unseelie leader—Mallucé had tried to kill me in order to silence me before I could betray his dirty secret. If he was still alive, I had no doubt he'd be coming after me again, sooner rather than later.

Mallucé wasn't the only worry on my mind. Was the Lord Master really unable to get past the ancient wards laid in blood and stone around the bookstore, as Barrons assured me? Who'd been driving the car transporting the mind-bending evil of the *Sinsar Dubh* past the bookstore last week? Where had it been taken? Why? What were all the Unseelie recently freed by the Lord Master doing right now? And just how responsible was I for them? Does being one of the few people who can do something about a problem make you responsible for fixing it?

It was midnight before I slept, bedroom door locked, windows buttoned up tight, lights ablaze.

The instant I opened my eyes, I knew something was wrong.

TWO



It wasn't just my *sidhe*-seer senses that tipped me off, screaming something Fae was very near.

My bedroom has hardwood floors and there's no threshold strip beneath the door. I usually wedge a towel into the gap—okay, several—packed in by books, fortified with a chair, topped by a lamp so if some bizarre new monster slithers in through the crack, the lamp breaking will startle me awake, and buy me just enough time to be almost conscious when it kills me.

Last night I forgot.

As soon as I roll over in the morning, I glance at the haphazard stack. It's my way of reassuring myself that nothing found me during the night and I live to see another day in Dublin, for whatever that's worth. This morning my observation that I'd forgotten to stuff the crack was accompanied by another that made my heart freeze: The gap beneath the door was dark.

Black. As in pitch.

I leave all the lights on at night, not just inside my bedroom but inside the entire bookstore, and outside the building, too. The exterior of Barrons Books and Baubles is flanked front, sides, and back by brilliant floodlights, to keep the Shades in the adjacent Dark Zone at bay. The one time Barrons turned off those lights after dark, sixteen men were killed right outside the back door.

The interior is also meticulously lit, with recessed spotlights on the ceilings and dozens of table and floor lamps illuminating every nook and cranny. Since my run-in with the Lord Master, I've been leaving all of them on, twenty-four/seven. So far Barrons hasn't said a word to me about the pending astronomical utility bill and if he does I'm going to tell him to take it out of my account—the one he *should* be setting up for me for being his own personal OOP detector. Using my *sidhe*-seer talents to locate ancient Fae relics—Objects of Power, or OOPs for short—is hardly my idea of a dream job. The dress code leans toward black with stiletto heels, a style I've never gotten into; I prefer pastels and pearls. And the hours are lousy; I'm usually up all night, playing psychic lint brush in dark and scary places, stealing things from scary people. He can take my food and phone bills out of that account, and I could use a clothing allowance, too, for the things of my own that keep getting ruined. Blood and green goo are no friends of detergent.

I craned my neck to see out the window. It was still raining heavily; the glass panes were dark, and as far as I could tell from the warm cocoon of my bed the exterior floodlights weren't on, which hit

me about as hard as getting dropped, bleeding, into a tank of hungry sharks.

I *hate* the dark.

I shot from bed like a rock from a slingshot—one moment lying there, next crouched battle-ready in the middle of the room, a flashlight in each hand.

Dark outside the store, dark inside, beyond my bedroom door: “What the fr—fuck?” I exclaimed, then muttered, “Sorry, Mom.” Raised in the Bible Belt by a mother who’d firmly advocated the pervasive southern adage that “pretty girls don’t have ugly mouths,” Alina and I had created our own language for expletives at a young age. Ass was “petunia,” crap was “fudge-buckets,” the f-word was “frog.” Unfortunately, when you grow up saying those words instead of the actual cusswords, they prove every bit as hard a habit to break as cussing and tend to come out at inopportune moments, undermining your credibility in a big way. “Frog off, or I’ll kick your petunia” just doesn’t carry a lot of weight with the kind of people I’ve been encountering lately, nor have my genteel southern manners impressed anyone but me. I’ve been retraining myself, but it’s slow going.

Had one of my deepest fears manifested while I’d slept, and the power had gone out? As soon as I had that thought, I realized that not only was the clock still blinking the time, 4:01 A.M., cheery and orange as ever, but, duh, my overhead was on, same as it was every night when I went to sleep.

Juggling two flashlights into one hand, I fumbled the phone from the receiver. I tried to think of someone to call but drew a complete blank. I didn’t have

any friends in Dublin, and although Barrons seems to keep a residence in the store, he's rarely around and I have no idea how to reach him. There was no way I was calling the police.

I was on my own. I replaced the receiver and listened hard. The silence in the store was deafening, fraught with terrible possibilities—monsters lurking with homicidal glee, right outside my bedroom door.

I wriggled into my jeans, swapped a flashlight for my spear, stuffed three more flashlights in the back of my waistband, and crept to the door.

I could feel that there was something Fae beyond it, but that was all I knew. Not what, how many, or even how close, just a deep malaise in my stomach accompanied by a foul itchiness in my brain that made me feel like a cat with its back up, claws out, fur spiked. Barrons assures me *sidhe*-seer senses improve with experience. Mine had better start improving fast or I won't live to see next week. I stared at the door. I must have stood there for five minutes trying to talk myself into opening it. The unknown is a vast paralyzing limbo. I'd like to tell you that the monster under the bed is rarely as bad as your fear of it, but in my experience it's almost always worse.

I slid the dead bolt, parted door from jamb in the narrowest of slivers, and knifed the sharp white beam of my flashlight through it.

A dozen Shades shrank back, retreating with oily swiftness to the edge of the light and not one inch farther. Adrenaline kicked me in the teeth. I slammed the door shut and drove the dead bolt home.

There were Shades inside Barrons Books and Baubles!

How in the world had *that* happened? I'd checked the lights before I'd gone to bed—they'd all been on!

I pressed myself against the door, shaking, wondering if I'd really woken up or if I was still dreaming. I've had some bad dreams lately and this was certainly the stuff of nightmares. I might be a *sidhe*-seer and a mythic Null, I might have one of the Fae's deadliest weapons in my possession, but even I'm defenseless against the lowest caste of Unseelie. Ironic, I know.

"Barrons!" I shouted. For reasons my taciturn host refuses to divulge, the Shades leave him alone. That the deadly bottom-feeders of the dark Fae give Jericho Barrons a wide berth perturbs me immensely but I'd promise to never ask him another question about it again, if only he'd cut a swath through them right now and save me.

I shouted his name until my throat hurt, but no knight-errant rushed to my rescue.

Under normal circumstances, if the Shades had been outside the store in the streets, dawn would have driven the amorphous vampires back to wherever it is they hide during the day, but it was so stormy I doubted enough light could filter through the bookstore's alcoved windows to affect them in here. Even if the dense cloud cover passed and the sun came out, strong sunlight wouldn't enter the main floor of the bookstore before early afternoon.

I groaned. But Fiona would, long before that. This past week she'd begun working extended hours at the bookstore. Increased customer demand, she'd

said. Lots of early morning clients. She'd been arriving at the shop at precisely eight-forty-five A.M. to open the bookstore at nine o'clock sharp.

I had to warn her off, before she walked into a waiting Shade ambush!

And now that I thought about it, I was pretty sure she knew how to reach Barrons, too. I snatched up the phone and rang the operator.

"County?" he inquired.

"All of Dublin," I said briskly. Surely Fiona lived nearby. If not, I'd try the outlying counties.

"Name?"

"Fiona...uh...Fiona..." With a sound of disgust, I dropped the phone back in the cradle. I was so panicked I hadn't realized I didn't know Fiona's last name until I'd needed it.

Back to square one.

I had two choices: I could stay up here, safe with my flashlights while, in a few hours, the Shades devoured Fiona and any number of innocent, hapless patrons who might subsequently stroll through the door she unlocked, or get my panicked act together and stop that from happening.

But how?

Light was my only weapon against the Shades. Though I suspected Barrons might get positively hostile if I set his store on fire, I had matches, and it would certainly drive them out. However, I didn't want to be inside the building when it went up in flames, and since I could hardly jump from the fourth floor, and there was no fire escape or convenient stash of bed linens to knot into a rope, I filed that option away in the category "Last Resort." Un-

fortunately I could see only one other resort, and it wasn't a sunny spot in the Bahamas. I stared dismally at the door.

I was going to have to run the gauntlet.

How had the Shades gotten inside to begin with? Was the power out in part of the store and they'd slithered in through a crack? Could they do that? Or had the lights somehow gotten turned off? If so, I could creep from switch to switch, armed with flashlights, and turn them back on.

I don't know if you're familiar with the child's game Don't Touch the Alligator, but Alina and I used to play it when Mom was too busy with something else to notice that we were hopping from the Sunday parlor sofa, to her favorite lace-covered pillows, to that awful chair Gram brocaded to match the curtains, and so on. The idea is that the floor is full of alligators and if you step on one of them, you're dead. You have to get from one room to the next, without ever touching the floor.

I needed to get from the top floor of the bookstore to the bottom without ever touching the dark, and I wasn't sure how completely I couldn't touch it. Barrons says they can only get you in full darkness, but did that mean a Shade could eat me, or part of me, if for one second, a single foot, or something so small as a toe protruded into shadow? The stakes in this game were significantly higher than a carpet-burned knee, or a scolding from Mom if I slipped up. I'd seen the piles of clothing and human rinds the Shades left behind after a meal.

Shivering, I pulled on my boots, zipped a jacket

over my pajama top, and tucked two of my six flashlights into the waistband of my jeans, front and back, pointed up. I tucked two more into the snug elastic waistband of my jacket, pointed down to shine on my vulnerable toes. Those were iffy. If I moved too quickly they'd fall out, but I only had so many hands. I carried the other two. I slipped a pack of matches into my pocket and tucked the spear into my boot. I'd have no use for it against this particular enemy, but there might be others. It was possible the Shades were merely the vanguard, and there was worse to come.

I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and opened the door. When the overhead light arced into the hallway, the Shades repeated their oily retreat.

Shades come in all different shapes and sizes. Some are small and thin, others tall and wide. They have no real substance. They're hard to pick out from the darkness, but once you know what to look for you can spot them, if you're a *sidhe*-seer. They're areas that are darker and denser, and ooze malevolence. They move around a lot, as if they're hungry and restless. They make no noise. Barrons says they're barely sentient, but once I shook my fist at one of them and it bristled back at me. That's sentient enough to worry me. They eat anything that lives: people, animals, birds, right down to the worms in the soil. When they take over a neighborhood, they turn it into a wasteland. I'd christened those barren landscapes Dark Zones.

"I can do this. Piece of cake." Embracing the lie, I aimed my flashlights and stepped into the hall.

It *was* a piece of cake. Turned out the power wasn't off; the switches had been thrown. Initially, I worked my way cautiously from wall switch to lamp, but when I realized the Shades were consistently staying beyond the reach of direct light, I gained confidence. Even in a windowless hallway of utter blackness, the flashlights bathed my body in white radiance that protected me. With each switch I threw, more Shades bunched up, until I had fifty or more of them crammed into the darkness I was forcing to retreat, light by light.

By the time I reached the landing of the first-floor stairwell, I was feeling downright cocky about my ability to clear the store of the Unseelie infestation.

I stepped briskly into the back parlor, heading for the light switch on the opposite wall. Three steps into the room, a damp breeze ruffled my hair. I swung my flashlight in that direction. A window was open onto the alley behind Barrons Books and Baubles! The truth was inescapable—interior and exterior lights off, a window propped open? Someone was trying to kill me!

I stomped toward the window and sprawled headlong over an ottoman that shouldn't have been there. My flashlights went flying in all directions, casting a dizzying strobe-light effect as they spun out of control across the floor. Shades erupted like panicked pigeons, flocking through the open window to the sanctuary of night.

Ha. Good riddance. Now I just needed to slam the window on them.

I scrambled up onto my hands and knees and froze right where I was—face-to...er...blackness-where-a-face-wasn't—with a Shade that hadn't fled. It wasn't one of the smaller ones, either. It had contorted itself to occupy the darkness between the flashlights, coiling snakelike over, under, and around the beams. I didn't want to think about the frighteningly quick reflexes it must have to have managed the trick. It was as high as the ceiling in several places, at least twenty feet long, and pulsed like a dark cancer, pressing at the edges of the light.

I sucked in a breath. I'd seen one do this before—test the light. I'd not stuck around long enough to learn the outcome of its test. I muttered a fervent prayer it had gotten an *F*. My flashlights were scattered across the floor. Two were shining on me, flanking me, left and right. I was far enough between them that the combined pool of light narrowly bathed my entire body, but if I were to crawl toward either one, the beam would dwindle the closer I got, leaving large parts of me in darkness. It was a risk I couldn't take with this abnormally aggressive, gigantic Shade crouching over me.

As I huddled there, it snaked inky tendrils of itself forward, one toward my hair haloed weakly in light, the other at my fingers splayed in a pale pool on the floor.

I yanked my hand back, fumbled the matches from my pocket, and struck one. The pungent smell of sulfur soaked the damp air.

The tendrils retreated.

Though it's tough to tell with something that has

no face, I swear it studied me, seeking my weaknesses. The match was burning down between us. I dropped it to the floor and lit another. There was no way I could strip off my jacket to set it on fire without my arms and part of my torso protruding into the dangerous darkness. Likewise, the ottoman over which I'd fallen was too far behind me to be of use.

But...the priceless Persian rug beneath me was starting to smolder. I exhaled a gentle puff on the glowing embers of the dropped match. It went out.

If Shades snicker, this one did. It expanded and contracted, and I swear I felt its mockery. I really hope I'm wrong. I really hope they aren't capable of complex thought.

"It would seem you are in need of assistance, *sidhe*-seer." A musical baritone drifted through the window, otherworldly, sensuous, and punctuated by a forbidding growl of thunder.