

O'BRIEN

The Book of Secrets

Alex Dunne

'Danger lurks where fae-winds blow ...'



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**For my mother, who taught me to believe in
fairies.**



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*November Eve brings dangers untold
For those who tread the fairy road,
Who walk the line 'tween life and death,
And awaken beings that take no breath.
So, listen close and heed this tale
If your wish is to prevail.*

*When moonlight flees from darkest sky,
That's when this spirit passes by.
A faceless rider you may see,
Who seeks to take thy life from thee.
Though his touch be cruel and cold,
He seeks silver, never gold.*

*A lonely voice leads travellers astray,
Her watery kingdom is where they'll stay.
But as rivers into sea must flow,
So too must this maiden go.
And all souls shall be free to roam,
Once the maiden has gone home.*

*Dangers lurk where fae-winds blow,
And treachery you'll find there when you go.
Open your eyes, look through, between,
Not all you see is as it seems.
The trickster knows more than he shows,
And all flee once the rooster crows.*

Prologue

When the Fairy Wind Blew In



When the fairies arrived in Clonbridge town, the wind changed direction. It blew away the rain that had battered the town for weeks and brought with it a low, rolling mist and the promise of frost.

The fairies slipped through the streets in groups of two or three, spreading minor mischief as they went – tipping over rubbish bins, swiping spare keys from under flowerpots, and pulling spark plugs from cars. They did not linger long, for they had work to do before the night was through.

The sky was already beginning to brighten when the fairy troop arrived at their final destination – the crumbling ruins of an ancient fort that sat on a hill just outside Clonbridge, shrouded by a thick forest of oak and hazel. The locals called this place Cullane Fort, but the fairies had another name for it. It was an older name, a secret name – *an Ráth Glas*. The Green Rath. They whispered it into the early morning air and felt rocks and roots shift beneath their feet. As their magic wound its way across the hilltop, the earth began to stir its ancient

bones. It had been many long years since the Revels were held in this place, but the land does not forget.

As the fairies looked on, the stones of the Green Rath began, impossibly, to *move*, as though an unseen hand was rebuilding the fort from the ground up. Within moments, the broken-down walls were already waist-high and a pair of weathered hawthorn bushes that flanked the entrance began to curve and twist until their branches formed an archway. The older fairies smiled. They remembered the Green Rath in its glory days when it was the finest fort in all of Ireland. It was good to be back.

So entranced were the fairies, they failed to notice the creature who watched them from the shadows at the edge of the clearing. He was tall and thin with long, twig-like fingers, a too-wide mouth, and eyes of rusty red. His lower half was covered in a dark, matted fur tangled with leaves and twigs, and in place of feet were a pair of shiny black hooves. He was a wild thing, a creature of forest and stream, and he had been asleep almost as long as the Green Rath had. An unfriendly being at the best of times, his temper was not improved upon discovering it was the *Sídhe* – the Trooping Fairies – who disturbed his decades-long slumber.

‘Foolish things,’ he muttered, curling a lip in disgust. ‘I thought I had seen the last of their kind decades ago.’

He was about to slip away and find some dark place to sleep undisturbed when the breeze that had carried the scent of the fairies up the hill and into his lair rose again. This time he caught a taste of something else on the air. Sea brine and brimstone. He sniffed. It seemed he was not the only one the *Sídhe* had awoken this night. There were other beings, more fearsome than he, who walked the roads around Clonbridge again.

The creature paused to consider this information and a new plan began to form. If there was one thing he valued

more than his solitude, it was the opportunity to sow a little chaos. He would need to set a few things in motion, but if all worked out, perhaps the fairy Revels might prove to be of interest to him after all. He made a decision.

Soundlessly, he stepped into the clearing, startling a group of fairies who had been relaxing against the walls of the Green Rath. One of them, a youth with long, sleek hair the colour of spun gold, jumped to his feet and bowed.

‘M-master Pooka,’ he stammered. ‘It has been a long time since we’ve seen you at court.’

The creature called the Pooka grinned. It was not a friendly smile.

‘Too long,’ he replied. ‘It’s high time I paid your queen a visit, wouldn’t you say? Tell me, lad, when do she and her retinue arrive?’

‘She and the king are due to arrive after sundown on *Samhain*, two nights hence,’ said the youth, recoiling slightly from the musty, damp-earth smell of the Pooka.

‘Good. That gives me plenty of time to get her a gift. She so enjoyed my last one, after all. Better run along now, the sun will be up soon.’

The young fairy nodded in relief and hastened into the mound with the rest of the *Sídh*e. None of them thought to offer the Pooka shelter from the fast-approaching dawn, but the creature didn’t mind: he preferred his own company anyway.

When he was sure he was alone in the clearing, the Pooka raised his arms to the sky and whistled. From the branches of a nearby tree came a single magpie who circled the creature once before coming to rest on his outstretched hand.

‘Master,’ squawked the magpie. ‘It has been a while. How can I be of service?’

The Pooka leaned in close to the bird and whispered in his ear, 'I need you to pay someone a visit ...'

When the Pooka was done, the magpie nodded once and took flight, heading directly for the town below. The Pooka glanced at the rapidly brightening sky before melting back into the shadows of the woodland. It was time to rest and gather his strength. He had a busy night ahead.

Chapter One

Once a Witch ...



Now that the rain had finally stopped, Cat and her friends were allowed outside for eleven o'clock break for the first time in what felt like forever. When the bell rang, the whole class jumped to their feet and charged for the door, ignoring Mr Brennan's shouted reminder to stick to the schoolyard because the field was still wet and boggy after the latest downpour.

Cat hoped the drier weather would last throughout the weekend because tomorrow was Halloween and she had plans. Top of the list was trick-or-treating. Now that she was eleven years old she was painfully aware that her trick-or-treating days were numbered so she made a solemn promise to herself to make the most of it this year ... just in case. After they had their fill of chocolate and sweets, she and her friends would pay a visit to the local bonfire. Some of the older children had been stockpiling wood for the past few weeks and the word around town was that it would be the biggest bonfire Clonbridge had ever seen. Of course, that was the rumour every year and every year it was much the same - a mildly disappointing affair broken up by the Gardaí as soon as the first crack

of a firework was heard. It didn't matter, Cat was still excited. Halloween was her absolute favourite time of year.

The only downside to her plans was that she had to bring her baby brother Mikey along. Mikey was fifteen months old and couldn't walk for very long before crying that he wanted to be carried. Cat tried to protest that Mikey was too small to appreciate Halloween, but her mam had stood firm, saying that Mikey deserved to join in the fun and reminding her that she didn't have time to bring him herself.

'You know I have my classes on Saturdays, Kitty-Cat,' she said, ignoring Cat's scowl at the use of her hated nickname. 'Please, I really need to you to help me out. You only need to bring him up and down the street and then you'll have the rest of the evening with your friends, I promise. Besides, Granny will be around if you need anything.'

'If Granny's there to watch Mikey, then why do *I* have to bring him at all?'

Her mam didn't answer. She just gave Cat one of her legendary *because-I-said-so* stares that meant the conversation was over.

Cat's sense of injustice deepened when her mam returned from the shops the following day with two costumes - a plastic Batman outfit for Mikey and a pointed witch's hat for her.

'But I was a witch last year. I wanted to go as a haunted doll this time!' she said with indignation.

'I know, Cat, but I couldn't get to the shops any earlier and they were sold out of almost everything,' said her mam as she tried to feed a protesting Mikey, who, on top of being the most annoying baby in the world, was also fussy around food. 'You'll have to just make do.'

Before Cat could formulate a suitable reply, her mam had turned away to tend to Mikey who was sobbing over

his upended bowl of Coco Pops.

Just like that it was settled. She would be bringing Mikey trick-or-treating and, once again, she would be dressed as a witch.

After a quick detour to the school's library room to return the book she had borrowed, *Halloween Through the Ages*, Cat stepped out into the yard and spotted her friends huddled in a circle by the fence.

'Cat!' Jess shrieked happily. 'Come join us. We're telling scary stories.'

'Karol was telling us about knick-knacks,' added Sarah, Jess's twin sister who had been born five minutes before her and clung to the title of 'older sister' fiercely, always cutting across her twin whenever possible.

'*Nocnica*,' corrected Karol, blushing slightly to find himself the centre of attention. Karol was a quiet Polish boy who had moved to Clonbridge last year. He was nice, but painfully shy. When the twins noticed he spent most of his time alone they quickly co-opted him into their friend group.

'Whatever,' said Jess, rolling her eyes with exaggeration. 'Go on then, tell us more about them.'

'Well,' he said slowly, 'my brother Lukasz says they come to your room at night when you're asleep and sit on your chest and suck your soul out of your mouth. Lukasz says that's why you should always sleep on your side. They can't steal your soul when you're on your side.'

'That's stupid,' said Shane, a tall, freckled boy who was leaning against the fence reading a comic and eavesdropping on their conversation as always. She wondered why he even bothered. Cat knew for a fact he didn't like her, and she suspected he didn't like her friends much either. Shane didn't seem to like anything.

'I don't think anyone asked your opinion,' said Sarah, shooting Shane an angry look. 'Go on, Karol, how else can you stop the *Nocnica*?'

‘Well,’ said Karol, eyeing Shane warily, ‘a stone with a hole in it can make them disappear. I don’t know why ...’

Shane snorted again, ‘So what, you just carry a stone with a hole in it around with you all the time? That’s so dumb.’

‘Oh, shut *up*, Shane!’ snapped Ebele. ‘I want to hear what Karol’s saying.’

Ebele was the daughter of the town’s doctor. She was the smartest kid in class by far, as well as one of the kindest. She rarely got mad, but when she did, everyone tended to listen. Shane opened his mouth as if to say something else, but finding four angry girls glaring back at him, he thought better of it and leaned back against the fence in a huff.

‘Have you ever seen one?’ Ebele asked, leaning forward in excitement.

‘I think they’re only in Poland,’ said Karol with a shrug.

‘I’ve seen a Banshee,’ said Cat and almost immediately regretted it. She hadn’t meant to tell anyone that.

They all turned to stare at her, even Shane.

‘Did you really?’ asked Jess. ‘No messing?’

Cat nodded. ‘Last year, on the night my granddad died. Me and Mam and Mikey had been staying over at Granny and Granddad’s house at the time because he was really sick and the doctors said he probably wouldn’t, you know ...’

Cat trailed off. She didn’t like thinking about that time when everyone was so sad and she hadn’t known how to help.

‘Anyway, it was the middle of the night and this weird screeching sound woke me up. It was coming from outside and it was the worst noise I’ve ever heard, like a fork scraping on a plate or ...’

‘Or Mrs Quinn’s singing!’ said Sarah, causing them all to erupt into gales of laughter. Mrs Quinn was the

teacher in charge of the school choir and her enthusiasm for singing was as great as her voice was terrible.

Cat smiled and continued. 'When I heard the noise, I ran to the window and saw a woman outside the house. There was something strange about her, almost like she wasn't fully there. She was just sort of floating there above the ground. And her eyes ...' Cat shuddered. What could she say about her eyes? They were totally empty and darker than the sky on a starless night. Looking into them was like staring into a bottomless pit. 'When she looked up at me, I thought I was going to die.'

'What happened next?' asked Ebele in an almost-whisper.

'I thought I was having a nightmare at first, but then the door banged open and Granny was standing there with a face like thunder. She ran to the window and yelled at the Banshee.'

'She didn't!' said Jess.

Cat nodded. 'She did. She said, "*You've already got him, you old crone, now away with you!*" but that's my Granny for you.'

Cat's friends nodded sagely. They were all familiar with Granny Mary and could well imagine her threatening a supernatural being.

'Granny told me to go back to sleep and when I woke up the next morning, Granddad was gone.'

For a moment, no one said anything. Cat looked down at her feet. She hadn't meant to make things awkward. Suddenly, the bell rang out, breaking the silence and summoning them all back to class. Reluctantly, they trudged toward the building.

'Did you really see a Banshee?' asked Shane, slowing down to walk beside Cat.

'Maybe,' she said carefully, 'or maybe I'm just trying to freak you all out before Halloween.'

Shane rolled his eyes. 'I knew it,' he muttered and stalked off.

But it wasn't a lie. Cat really *had* seen a Banshee. Or at least, she thought she had. It been so long since she had seen the pale woman, she was starting to doubt it had really happened at all. Granny never doubted though. A few days after Granddad's funeral she sat Cat down and told her she had 'the Sight', just like all the other women in the family.

Well, *almost* all the women. Cat's mam didn't believe in the Sight and would give out to Granny every time she brought it up, telling her to stop filling Cat's head with nonsense.

'Every so often the Sight skips a generation,' Granny said with a sniff. 'I blame your granddad, bless his soul. He was a lovely man, but he wanted for a bit of imagination.'

Ever since then it had been their secret and, truth be told, it was the reason Cat was so excited for Halloween this year - she could finally swap ghost and fairy stories with Granny without her mam pursing her lips in disapproval.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a pleasant haze. It was almost midterm break, so Mr Brennan decided to take it easy on the class. Instead of their usual Friday maths and spelling lessons, he allowed them to spend an hour painting Halloween-inspired pictures. Cat painted a creepy doll with haunted eyes and sighed. *Maybe next year ...*

Chapter Two

An Armour Against the World



When the final bell rang, Cat and her friends grabbed their coats and scarves from the back of the classroom and ran out the door, eager to enjoy what little was left of the afternoon. Up until this year, Granny would pick Cat up at the school gates, but now she was in fifth class Cat felt she was old enough to make her own way home. Surprisingly, her mam had agreed – as long as she came straight home and didn't dilly-dally. This was not a hard promise to keep because there wasn't much to dilly-dally over in Clonbridge. It wasn't a big town – there was Main Street with the usual scattering of pubs and chip-shops, a church with an imposing white steeple, a corner shop that had seen better days, and a well-manicured sports field. The building of the motorway had seen the population of the town begin to grow in recent years, but it was still small enough that everyone knew everyone else and there were plenty of people to tell her mother if they caught her doing anything remotely forbidden.

Cat and the other girls waved goodbye to Karol at the school gates and headed for home discussing their plans for Halloween – which neighbours they should visit (the

Callanans were top of the list because they always handed out full-size bars of chocolate), and which they should avoid (old Mrs Sweeney was out. She was a monkey-nuts-and-apples kind of person and always seemed to disapprove of their choice of costume).

‘If this is our last year trick-or-treating, I want to go out with a bang,’ said Ebele. ‘No wasting time and absolutely NO fruit.’

They all murmured their agreement.

‘You should ask if you can sleep over at ours after the bonfire,’ said Sarah. ‘We can watch some scary films.’

‘Great idea!’ said Cat, already feeling a shiver of anticipation at the thought. She was never allowed to watch scary films at home, but Jess and Sarah’s older brother Conor was an avid collector of old horror movies. Last time they had a sleepover he had let them borrow *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Cat had nightmares of her own for weeks afterward and her mam absolutely flipped when she found out. She thought Cat was too young for those kinds of films. She was always trying to baby her.

‘Want to come in and do homework together?’ Jess asked when they reached the gate to the twin’s house. ‘Our mam won’t mind.’

‘Count me in!’ said Ebele.

‘Cat?’ asked Sarah.

It was a tempting offer. Mr Brennan had given them fractions to do over the midterm and it would be good to get them over and done with so she could properly enjoy the break. On top of that, Cat loved spending time at the twins’ house. It was as different from hers as could be. Jess and Sarah had two other siblings – their older brother Conor, who was fourteen, and their younger brother Jamie, who was five years old. Their mam was always there when they arrived home from school, ready to dole out drinks or a snack. When their dad was there, he would crack the worst jokes that somehow still had