

DARK AND DANGEROUS GIFTS OF
DELORES
MACKENZIE

QUEEN OF COINS

YVONNE BANHAM



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DANGEROUS GIFTS OF
DELORES
MACKENZIE**

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For Terry, Hope and Alexandra

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1

Delores always left her escape from the island until the last possible minute. She loved the race along the causeway, competing against the rapidly rising tide, daring the waves to push her off her feet as she dashed through the first slithers of incoming seawater.

This particular afternoon was sharp and blustery, with March winds sending storm clouds scudding along the Firth. Even by her usual standards Delores had left it late, huddled against the wall of the old lookout as she finished one more chapter. She stuffed the book in her pack as fat, cold drops of rain burst on the back of her neck. As she turned towards the causeway that linked Cramond Island to the mainland, she saw a dark smudge at the edge of her vision.

‘Can’t be,’ she whispered.

The prickling on her arms told her different. A suggestion of a shadow, an echo of a person long dead, a Bòcan.

‘What are you doing here?’ she shouted. ‘You never come out here!’

The Bòcan darted to the side, almost impossible to track in the storm-soaked light.

Delores swung her pack over her shoulders, pulled up her hood and ran down the steep bank onto the shale.

The water was already lapping the causeway. She walked quickly, shoulders hunched, hands thrust deep in her pockets. Faster. Then running. There was a disturbance in the space behind her. Her hood was yanked back, and the neck of her coat was pulled tight around her throat. Something grabbed at her hair, dragging her back but she kept her balance - just.

Delores tried to scream but what little voice she had left was drowned by the cries of the sea birds that hovered on the updraft. Her hood slackened and a dark figure, more solid now, slid behind one of the stone pylons that lined the causeway. A man once, she thought, from its shape, its movements. She waited, watching for the Bòcan to show itself again.

Nothing.

Delores turned again towards the shore, towards home. If she ran hard, she'd make it in a couple of minutes, but her feet were skittering along the stones that were slick with new seawater and the remnants of dead weed. She felt periwinkles crunching under her boots and the corvids that had been feeding on them rose in front of her, making nothing of the violent wind.

Delores sensed something reaching out for her as she raced towards the foreshore. Just a few more metres. She slipped as she hit the turn in the path and slammed down onto her right hip. There was no time to register the pain. Something tugged on her backpack and dragged her a few inches across the rough surface towards the water, scuffing her jeans and the skin beneath. The shock froze her for a moment.

'What are you doing?' she screamed into the wind. 'Let me go!'

Delores flung her weight forward and scrambled back to her feet. The sky had darkened to an inky midnight-blue and the row of white cottages ahead became vivid against it. She took a deep breath and powered up the

slipway, her feet sliding back on the sand that was blowing across its hard surface, her legs shaking with effort. She reached the foreshore and raced towards home, the sound of her own boots barely disguising the footsteps gaining on her with every metre. She prayed that her sister would be home, that the door wouldn't be locked. The handle twisted and she fell in through the door. She reached back to catch it and slammed it shut behind her.

Delores slid down onto the cold stone floor.

'Could do with some help here!' she shouted.

Delilah rushed through from the kitchen and threw herself down next to Delores, adding her weight to the door as something pounded and rattled from the other side of the wood.

'Bòcan?' grunted Delilah, as the door banged the air out of her lungs.

Delores nodded. 'Chased me from the island.' The door thudded into their backs again.

'Thought you said they never go out there?' said Delilah, "'All that salt", you said. Wow, Delores, this one's strong!' A single violent bang on the door, then silence for a few moments.

Delores put her hand on the back of her neck. When she pulled it away, there was blood on her fingers. 'It grabbed me,' she whispered.

'Grabbed? Where?' Delilah leaned in to check for damage.

Delores swerved away from her sister and wiped her hand on the underside of her jeans. 'Probably just wanting to play. Like when I was little.'

'Play?' The door thudded into their backs again. 'This one feels pretty substantial,' said Delilah. 'Not like your old imaginary friends.'

'They were *never* imaginary... You had them too; I know you did.' Delores pressed her back into the door,

already feeling the bruises in the knobby bones of her spine.

'I did,' said Delilah, 'but I left mine behind when I grew up, and they never tried to hurt me. This is a bit different from your dolls' tea parties. You must be sending out some powerful signals to attract this strength of manifestation.' She took a breath. 'You know it's time, don't you? For you to go to the Uncles?'

Delores felt her stomach fold in on itself. The threat of the Uncles had been looming dark on the horizon for some time, ever since their parents disappeared. Delilah had dropped hints here and there, the odd mention, but she'd known better than to broach the subject full on. Delores knew what was coming. 'No way I'm going to those creeps,' she said. 'Forget it.'

Delilah shifted slightly, digging her heels firmly into the kitchen floor, bracing for the next impact. 'Those *creeps*,' she said, 'are the key to you having a tolerable life, stopping the worst of these things pushing through.'

'A *tolerable* life? Fabulous. What every girl dreams of.'

There was another single, powerful bang, smashing the door against their spines. Then silence. Delores and Delilah held their positions, their ears prickling, searching for signs that the Bòcan had gone.

There was a gentle tapping on the wood. Light and patient.

'Bit of a change of tactic,' whispered Delores. 'Should I take a look?'

Delilah shook her head and pressed her finger to her lips. They heard light footsteps walking away from the door. She frowned at Delores and whispered, 'Sounds like they're getting smart as well as angry. Tactical ghouls we can do without, thanks.'

Delores leaned forward to undo her laces, but her fingers were bright red and painful from the bitter wind.

‘Let me,’ said Delilah. ‘You will have to go, Delores ... to the Uncles, I mean. We all have to go through the process, like it or not.’

‘Not. Not now. Not ever. I’m actually quite fond of who I am, thanks.’ Delores tried to nudge her sister’s hand out of the way, but Delilah held on to the laces, picking at a knot that was bound tightly by seawater and sand.

‘It’s not *who* you are that’s the problem, it’s *what* you are and *how* you manage it. Stop fidgeting and let me do it!’ Delilah pulled her sister’s foot onto her lap. ‘Look how those things are changing. You’re going to get hurt ... and...’

‘And what?’ Delores searched her sister’s face for clues, for a reason behind her hesitation.

‘A letter came, from Norway,’ whispered Delilah. ‘I’ve been assigned.’

Assigned. That meant Delilah would leave, move on. It hit Delores like a rock in the centre of her chest. ‘You didn’t even tell me you were applying!’ she said. ‘How could you not tell me?’

Delilah tried to shift a long curl that hung over her face as she exhaled. She brushed the hair away in a gesture that was so like their mother it made Delores’ heart ache.

‘I didn’t apply,’ said Delilah. ‘They contacted me after getting a recommendation from the Uncle I studied under in St Andrews. Barnabas always liked me. Thought I had potential.’

‘You could say no,’ said Delores.

Delilah stared at her sister’s bootlaces, at the sand on the floor, anything to avoid looking Delores in the eye. ‘I could if I wanted to. But I don’t. It’s the right time and it’s a great placement. I’ll learn so much, maybe even get as far as the Upper Council.’

Delores pulled her foot away. ‘Upper Council? You make it sound harmless. Call it what it is. The *Psychic*

Adjustment Council. And that's exactly what they do, adjust people. It's what they'd do to me, given half a chance. If Mum was here...'

'Well, she isn't, and we don't know if they're ever coming back.' Delilah shifted up onto her knees so she could peep through the letterbox. 'We all have to go through it,' she said, 'learn to manage our signals, keep those things on the other side, where they belong. Looks like it's gone.' She flopped back down again.

'Could have told you that,' said Delores. 'The prickling's gone right along with it. It's given up.'

'For now, maybe, but what if it tries again? We don't know who they were before they died, what they did. The ones you played with when you were little, they were fine, probably died when they were children. These ones? I don't think so. That protection Mum put on the cottage won't last much longer; they're chipping away at it every time they come knocking.'

'If you mean the troll cross,' said Delores, 'it's still there. I checked. They can't get in. She made sure of it after that one bit me.'

Delilah put her hand on Delores' arm. 'Have you *really* checked? It's cracked. One of the loops is broken. And even if we could fix it, they'd still be waiting outside.'

Delores pulled her arm away. 'You're overreacting. It's fine.'

'It's not fine. The Council will only put up with so much. They have rules, guidelines, that need to be respected.'

Delores could barely stifle a groan. 'Seriously?' she said. 'What are they going to do to me tucked away here? Cramond's hardly the centre of the paranormal sphere.'

Delilah opened her mouth to say something, but the words didn't appear, just a light pink flush of her cheeks. 'Be careful,' she said. 'You'd be surprised what they can

do. You have to sort this out whatever you think about the Council and you know it.'

Delores hugged her knees, peering out over the top of them at the comforting, familiar kitchen with its scrubbed oak table and ancient cooking range. Their mother's jars of potions and dried herbs still cluttered the shelves that their father had so lovingly made for her from driftwood. He'd collected tiny bird skulls, their bones as delicate as lace, just for Delores, and her mother had made space for them between the bundles of lavender and sage, never fazed by any connection the family felt with death. The dust it all gathered day by day slowly dampened any hope of their parents' safe return.

'What will we do with this place?' muttered Delores. 'It's all we have left of Mum and Dad. How will they know where to find us?'

Delilah tried to put her arm around her sister's shoulder, but Delores shrugged her off. 'We can't just sit here waiting and hoping they'll walk through the door one day. I need my own life. I love you but I can't look after you forever.'

'Who asked you to?' Delores got to her feet and grabbed her bag. 'When do I go?'

Delilah swallowed hard. 'Next week. It's at the Tolbooth Book Store in the Old Town. They were a bit reluctant at first, but they said they'd make space for you.'

'How very accommodating of them,' said Delores.

Delilah closed her eyes, sighing away the last few breaths of patience she had for the conversation. 'You know what that part of the city's like, Delores; no one'll even notice you. Tourists expect to feel strange things. They *want* to be creeped out.'

'I don't creep people out.'

'You sure? How many friends have you got? And the weekend job at the café didn't last five minutes. You

blend in in the Old Town. You always have.'

As much as she'd like to disagree with anything her sister had to say right now, Delores knew it was true. She'd spent hours, days, wandering those streets, running her hands along the old walls, waiting for the tingle that told her something might be waiting on the other side. Areas like Edinburgh Old Town smudged the lines between Paranormals and Normals, both governments happy for them to exist alongside each other as long as certain proprieties were observed. A lot of ancient towns and cities had similar areas, York, Reykjavik, Tromsø. Delores did stay out of the graveyards, even though she was drawn to them. They made her anxious, as if she might be over-run somehow. The Bòcain had swirled around Delores for as long as she could remember: shadows, over-stayers from a past life clinging wraith-like to the present. It was her mother who'd named them. It was an old Gaelic word from her own childhood, meant to comfort Delores when she was too small to fully understand death.

Delores often caught movements out of the corner of her eye: someone slipping around a corner; a child waving, then gone; a magazine closing itself or a cup pushed to the edge of a table, teetering, teasing, spilling to the floor. Necromancy was its official name. That was her skill, communing with the dead, but a Bòcan was much more than a voice or a casual haunting. Simple ghosts were explained to her as echoes, stuck memories with no realisation of death. Bòcain knew they were dead, and they didn't like it. They were drawn to the living, to certain people. People like Delores Mackenzie.

Bòcain had kept Delores company when other children refused, when promises of *another time* never materialised. Delores accepted the strange creatures into the empty space where friendship should have sat, never questioned their presence or feared their arrival. But

there'd been a shift. An elemental change. Was it when she was thirteen? When she turned fourteen? Delores couldn't quite put her finger on when it happened, but she knew the Bòcain wanted more than games and stories. She just didn't know what yet.

Delores put her hand to the back of her neck again and winced, prompting Delilah to force a hug on her whether she wanted it or not.

'Just look at you,' said Delilah. 'I can't keep you safe any more. The Uncles can. Maybe it'll just be for a few months, until you get things under control. Don't be mad, but I already applied to take you out of school. After the stuff that's been happening around you, and the nonsense from the other girls, they didn't put up much of a fight.'

It tugged at Delores that she was deemed so disposable. She pushed her sister away.

'Do I have a choice?' she asked.

Delilah shook her head. 'Not this time. It's arranged, all of it.'

Delores needed to snatch something from the jaws of her inevitable defeat.

'If I am going, the least you can do is promise me something.'

'Sure.' Delilah shrugged, eager to smooth the waters.

'Try to find out what happened to Mum and Dad. Someone must know. If they were dead, don't you think I'd have seen them by now?'



2

In the few days that followed, Delores took advantage of her sister's guilt over their impending departures. She got the haircut she wanted, bristle-short against the back of her head. So short, she could feel the outline of her skull.

'Occipital,' she whispered. She loved the sound of the word, the feel of the bone. Her finger slipped down to the scratch below her hairline, still raised from her encounter with the Bòcan on the causeway. She shook her head from side to side, dissolving the memory, enjoying the feeling of her thick dark curls falling forward from the crown of her head to her face. She ran her hand over the short sides and winced as her finger caught the new cuff piercing in her right ear. She was pleased with the overall effect and its added bonus of self-preservation, but Delores could hardly tell her classmates that it was to stop violent apparitions grabbing her by the hair. They'd been happy to add her new look to the long list of Things-That-Make-Delores-Mackenzie-a-Total-Loser. Until now, she'd managed to keep her paranormal signals bottled up until she got home, but something had shifted in the fibres that lined her veins and ran through her muscles. An essence that the other girls didn't have, the *normal* girls, the girls who didn't see the dead, or dream other people's dreams, or read the future. The girls who existed

alongside the Paranormals, the psychics and the seers, without ever noticing them. They couldn't quite figure out what it was about Delores Mackenzie, but they sniffed out her difference like foxes hunted prey. Even technology was making moves against her, stalling whenever she came near. The school library system had crashed when her hand made the lightest of contact with the barcode reader as she tried to check out an edition of Edgar A. Poe's *Works*. The deliciously gothic, leather-bound volume had slipped seamlessly under her jacket amidst the chaos. It was her last day at her old school - and the best.

Sitting on her bed, possibly for the last time, Delores ran her hand over that same book. She'd found it in the Benefactor's Corner of the library, a space dedicated to books from grand old houses around Edinburgh and their long-dead owners. It was a quiet space, unpopular, and she loved it. She hadn't been looking for anything specific that day and her hand had been drawn to the book before her eye was. As she'd opened it, she'd been beguiled by the aging pages' vanilla scent and the tingling in her fingertips as she touched the endpapers. There was a faded inscription on the yellowed title page: *To my darkest Angel, my Lady of the Tower*, and it thrilled her every time she saw it. Delores was glad she'd rescued such a book from the unappreciative hands of her ex-school and her ex-life, but as she held it her arms felt heavy, and a deep discomfort settled into the pit of her stomach. It wasn't guilt; what had she to feel guilty about? It had been an act of liberation. *Probably just nerves* she told herself. Meeting new people was pretty much at the top of her list of least favourite things. She slid the book into her rucksack, next to the envelope stuffed with cash. Delilah had given it to her for 'extras', with the promise of more to follow. Cash machines and

payment gadgets threw up a whole other realm of problems, either cloaking themselves in frost or hissing out sparks as they spat Delores' mangled bankcard back at her.

Delilah tapped on the bedroom door to hurry her sister along. Delores wrapped one of her smallest, most fragile bird skulls in a silk scarf soaked in her mother's perfume and placed it with great tenderness into her coat pocket. She closed her eyes and focused on the sounds of the birds and the sea, the creaks and sighs of the cottage, banking each and every one as a precious memory.

Growing up, Delores had woken every morning to the smell of breakfast drifting up through her floorboards from the kitchen. She would huddle under her quilt, listening to her parents chatting about the day ahead as they prepared bacon or sausages to fill freshly warmed crusty bread rolls along with coffee too strong and too bitter for Delores' palate. But she'd drunk it anyway.

One morning, a little over a year ago, Delores overslept.

There were no noisy parents, just a missing suitcase and a few clothes abandoned on the floor. As the sisters scoured the cottage for clues, they found a scribbled note hidden under a placemat on the kitchen table. *Remember, we love you* was all it said.

Delilah had contacted the Department of Illusory and Treacherous Mislocations to try to find out what had happened to their parents but all they would say was that they could report no trace of them, living or dead. They decreed that, at seventeen, Delilah was quite old enough to be responsible for Delores and a small financial allowance was granted. Then followed a year of unanswered questions, gaping silence, and creeping doubt.

Delores slumped her way down the stairs and out of the cottage into the watery March sun. The wailing