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ABSTRACT

When I applied to Schreyer Honors College after my sophomore year here at Penn State, I did so with the intention of completing a non-traditional thesis. In my application, I talked about my love for the written word and making use of the resources provided by Schreyer to draft a work of fiction. At this point, I still had no concrete idea about what I would write about. I searched for inspiration the summer after I was accepted, reading different works of fiction as well as non-fiction, hoping that some brilliant idea would just pop into my head. When no such miraculous concept struck me, I began to lose a little bit of confidence in my desire to write a novella. I considered the possibility that I was not ready to take on such a large task, and if I could not come up with a compelling idea, I would remain at a loss.

It was not until I reached Dublin, Ireland, during my semester abroad in the spring of 2015 that I finally determined what it was I would write about. My favorite class each week was entitled “Exploring Gothic Ireland: Fact, Fiction, and Film.” My instructor, Michelle Piazza, came to class each day ready to share stories about Irish folklore and the magical myths celebrated within the Irish culture. I was entranced by her presentations each day, feeling as if I had been reverted to a childlike state when listening to tales about banshees and vampires. Here in the U.S., we have our stereotypical fairytales and Disney movies, but Michelle exposed me to stories I had never heard of and I was truly inspired by her magic.

I remember sitting in class on a particularly rainy Dublin day and feeling an idea come to me. We had just finished discussing the Irish fascination with faerie culture and superstitions that still exist today. Michelle had just told us about “changelings,” or faeries that have been exchanged for human children. The idea seemed far-fetched, yet I found myself wondering, what if something like this actually happened? What if there was some sort parallel world that we, as

humans, humans remained blissfully unaware of? The possibilities for crafting a story seemed endless, and I found myself distracted from our group discussion, writing down every thought that popped into my head.

When I finally determined that I would write a story inspired by Irish mythology, I felt a revamped sense of excitement about my project. I had something to focus on and a story to structure, but I had to settle on one idea. Did I want to write about a faerie changeling? Tap into the “cash cow” that is vampire romance? I genuinely could not decide. I knew I would be writing for young adults, causing me to lean more towards the vampire romance category, but I also wanted to write something fresh and give my readers something to really dig their teeth into. When it came down to it, I knew the person who would be able to help me hone in on a topic: my creative writing and photojournalism professor, Stephen McMahon.

I could write pages and pages on Stephen and his ability to inspire literally anyone or anything around him. I am fairly certain he could convince and inspire an inanimate object to start writing the next great Irish novel. Stephen is someone who believes everyone has potential. He accepts anyone’s opinion, giving weight to what you have to say and challenging you to think even further. I was positive he would be able to help me figure out which direction I wanted to take things. As soon as I asked him if he could help in any way, I remember Stephen lighting up, clearly excited at the prospect of me writing creatively, and proposing that we meet for tea the following day. When we did end up sitting down at a local café, Stephen let me talk everything out before eventually pointing me in the right direction. He asked what I had been inspired by and what had affected my studies the most. Immediately, the stories about the Magdalene Laundries and Irish mythology came to mind. I remember Stephen chuckling, claiming that I had interests all over the spectrum. It was with his help that I came up with the characters of Old

Woman Sheridan and the connection she a Fallon would ultimately share. We were not sure exactly how the two would be bonded, but at least I had a foundation to build my story upon. Thanks to Stephen, Fallon also gained her last name (McMahon).

From this point, I knew I just had to start writing. I would take a couple hours here and there to sit down and put words on paper. But while I was still in Dublin, I just felt the need to take notes about my experience. Whenever I would walk through the city, I would log something in my phone about interesting things I saw or people I met. I really did see a man walk into a café with a lipstick print on his cheek, and I knew it would be something that my main character would notice as well. It was having little things like these that made writing back in America that much easier. Whenever I would sit down to write, I had to make sure that I could transport myself mentally back to Ireland and put myself in Fallon's shoes. I wanted to make the novella feel authentic. Yes, Fallon has spent a significant portion of her childhood in America, but she is also distinctly Irish, having missed her true calling in the faerie world.

Writing as an American also posed its challenges. I had to find a happy medium between writing for an American audience, while also staying true to how the Irish live their lives. I had to decide between using military time versus standard time and the Metric System versus the Imperial System. I knew I would be writing for younger readers who may not be aware of such cultural differences, which made the decision a little bit harder for me. In the end, I decided to eliminate the possibility for confusion and keep things in American terms. I figured Fallon is somewhat Americanized, making it plausible for her to maintain usage of U.S. practices.

Probably the biggest difficulty I faced when writing this novella was the time constraint. Originally, I thought that working with a finite deadline would be helpful for me. Having that date in the back of my mind would keep me focused, knowing that I would have to submit my

final document at that time. However, I found that writing became somewhat of a chore for me. Instead of writing when inspiration struck, I had to force myself to sit down and get words on paper, making me slightly resent my project. There were times when I was genuinely excited to sit down and revisit Fallon's world, but others where I felt no desire to bring her back to life. I often found myself highly critical of my own work and style and chose to distance myself for weeks at a time. My friends and family begged for a sneak peak at whatever mysterious story I kept hidden, but I was too self-conscious to share it with anyone aside from my Honors Advisor and Faculty Reader.

Thankfully, my project came full circle right in time for it to be submitted. In the final weeks leading up to the due date, I was that much more devoted to my project and found myself wanting to go back through in order to truly make it the best it could be. I received feedback from my Honors Advisor, Anne Whitney, who seemed truly entertained after having read my story. I did not think my efforts had been worth much up until that point, but hearing her tell me that she had felt for Fallon and enjoyed the story gave me the little push I needed to carry myself through to the end. Jason Whitney, my Faculty Reader, gave me the final nudge when he read my draft and provided some last minute feedback. He also seemed excited about what I had written, and I was left feeling more confident in my abilities. For their assistance, guidance, and support, I am eternally grateful.

Overall, I feel as if I have produced a work of fiction that I can genuinely be proud of. I have put countless hours of thought into what to write and how to convey my love of Ireland and its culture to my readers, and I am hoping that is what will come through to anyone who chooses to read what I have written. My work is considered to be of novella length, but I find myself wondering if there is more to Fallon's story. Maybe a sequel or a revisit to what I already have

on paper will be something I consider in the future. I think I have left room for further development, maybe more exposition or detail could be added to enrich readers' experiences that much more. In general, I am thankful to Schreyer for providing me with the chance to put my writing skills to the test. I have come out of this experience feeling secure in my abilities to write under a deadline, write creatively, and ultimately stick to a project that I now feel proud of.

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I would also like to thank the entire faculty and staff of the IES Dublin Program, without whom I would not have found my inspiration. A special thanks should be extended to Michelle Piazza and Stephen McMahon, who were the first to accept my crazy idea to write a young adult fantasy.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and family. I have relied on them to keep me motivated as I completed this process, and their support has proven invaluable.

CHAPTER 1

A man breezed through the door, lipstick print on his cheek fresh from his morning goodbye. It was quite impressive how perfect the print itself was. It seemed almost to be placed there deliberately, not rushed, not impassive. The color, a light shade of maroon, said: *I love you. I'll miss you today.* Fallon McMahon couldn't help but smile at this man, a man she did not know, a man she did not necessarily care for. Yet his innocent indifference to the stamp on his cheek made him that much more appealing to her. She assumed he was headed to work. He was dressed smartly, a red jumper with dark jeans and loafers, maybe in his early twenties. Clearly not corporate, maybe a contributor for *The Times*. His hair was gelled, parted at the side, and slicked back with apparent care. Fallon imagined him reaching for his comb as the imprinter simultaneously reaches for her makeup. The two exchange a smile and there is a silent understanding between them. The morning routine.

Fallon turned her gaze back to her cappuccino. How easily her attention was distracted. Her imagination could run wild for hours if she were to let it. Coffee in hand, the man skirted passed her yet again, observing Fallon only briefly as he exited. Upon catching a glimpse, however, the man turned once more, staring almost to the point of being rude. His gaze locked Fallon's, yet he kept walking, clearly unaware of anything going on around him. It was not until a particularly spritely jogger bumped him that his daze lifted and a fresh Americano spilt down his ivory jumper. Flustered and embarrassed at Fallon having witnessed this, the man spun around, taking one last glance at the mysterious young woman through the window. Fallon watched as he wiped his cheek with the sleeve of his sweater, smearing both nervous perspiration and the ever so perfect lipstick print.

Fallon smiled to herself. She was used to attracting this kind of attention from those around her, not even just men. Her long raven-colored hair left little to be desired; it flowed down her back, and seemed so effortlessly perfect, it pained those in her social circle who spent hours trying to obtain the perfect curl. Emerald green, almond-shaped, and rimmed with ebony lashes; Fallon's eyes had the ability to entice anyone she met. An old, rather poetic boyfriend had once told her it was the interspersed flecks of gold that made them mesmerizing. "They're almost hypnotic," he'd said, "I couldn't look away if I tried." Fallon had no time for clichés, but always appreciated how males attempted to put her appearance into words. Her toned figure, which had never seen a day at the gym, stood at a perfect five feet, five inches—and while Fallon was not particularly gluttonous, she never seemed to feel the aftereffect of too many sweets or chips. Her beauty had been described as "ethereal," but to Fallon, being this attractive meant more attention she didn't want or need.

Unsettled, yet undoubtedly amused by her first encounter of the day, Fallon again shifted towards her cappuccino, which had since grown cold. She swirled the flat foam at the top and watched as the grains of coffee were suspended through the mixture. In all honesty, Fallon didn't even like coffee; she felt it unnecessary, cheating almost. Why should some get a jumpstart to their days and not others? It was a bizarre sentiment to have and yet she couldn't explain it. Just another consideration on another average day.

Her half-eaten scone sat lonely on her plate. Picking it up, Fallon lazily dunked it into the mug, watching the crumbs fall and intermingle with the coffee bits. The cake disintegrated, piece-by-piece, grain-by-grain. It was almost tragic how something that had once been whole could so easily fall apart.

She left a few euros on the table, pushed back the metal chair, and swung her handbag over her shoulder. Heads turned, but she tried not to pay any mind. It was just another day. She walked out of the café and picked up a brisk pace on Rathmines Road. Many of her neighbors complained about living so far from the Dublin's city centre, with only buses to rely on if you were in a hurry, but Fallon considered her walks a gift, more time to herself. It was times like these that her thoughts turned back towards America. A country populated by the stereotypical values of diversity and chance, but not nearly as enticing as Ireland. Her mother and father had met in Ireland, both studying abroad at universities in Dublin, and had gotten married prior to their graduation. Fallon had been born not long after and they had lived in a small apartment until she was a year old.

It was not generally spoken of, but her father had let it slip once that they only left Ireland after her mother had multiple miscarriages. Two in a row left her "tired" and she had asked that they take Fallon and relocate back to the states to be with family for a little while. When Mr. McMahon received a job offer that couldn't be refused, however, her mother found herself faced with returning to "The Emerald Isle." Fallon had felt inexplicable excitement when her parents told her of the move. No longer would she be confined to the bubble that was third-grade at a small-town elementary school, but she would be exposed to the possibilities and culture of Europe.

Aside from cultural exposure, there was something else, an innate draw, compelling almost, that led Fallon to believe Ireland was where she had been meant to be all along. Seven years later, she knew she had been right, but still felt an ebbing sense of something being missing. Her mother blamed it on "the changes of adolescence," but as she neared her

seventeenth birthday, Fallon felt more mature and in touch than ever, albeit the feeling of needing something more.

She let her mind wander yet again as she neared her favorite spot in all of Dublin, St. Stephen's Green. Located at the bottom of Grafton Street, a shopping hub stuffed with live performers, the Green serves as a hiatus from the city vibe of Dublin. Unlike so many other parks in the city, the Green was right in the middle of the action and conveniently located on Fallon's way to school. The oasis provided Fallon with a return to nature amidst an otherwise buzzing city center. The second she walked through the wrought-iron gates, she was greeted by beauty; there was no shortage of green blades of grass or flowers during the spring, nor was there ever the sense of being unwanted. Joggers flew past, most likely on their sixth lap of the small concourse, and mothers pushed prams occupied by young children. Simplicity.

Perhaps her favorite aspect of the park, but also the oddest, was how she consistently seemed to attract the runaway child. The stereotypical "lost child" at the playground, had always been something seen only on crappy American crime shows. But somehow there was always a little one tailing her along the pavement or on the green, hiding behind trees whenever she peered over her shoulder. She could spot a blond or ginger lock of hair poking out next to the dark surface of the bark. Fallon would let their little game carry on for a few minutes, never letting on that she was aware of the scheme. When she sensed as if they had wandered far enough away from where they belonged, she would turn around and beckon them with a soft smile and a flick of her wrist. They came – timidly – but clearly consumed by their own curiosity. They would look up at her with big eyes and she would ask them why they were following her. None ever seemed to be able to produce an answer, but would just shrug and continue to gaze or stroke her hair.

Fallon liked children, but she could never fully understand why it was that they liked her. Her beauty made her appealing, she supposed, or maybe it was her subdued nature that young ones were drawn to. The sensation of having them flock to her was the strangest of all. She did not particularly enjoy it, but she did not, by any means, hate it. At the end of the ordeals, she always found herself with the awkward task of locating and delivering the child back to its mother.

She thought about her own parents and how they probably wouldn't mind if a beautiful stranger were to take her off of their hands. She thought about the look in her mother's eyes whenever Fallon entered a room – it wasn't one particularly of fear, but clearly one of being unsettled. It was as if she didn't know what her own daughter would do at any moment in time. Fallon couldn't exactly argue this. She was not necessarily “easy” to deal with and had been notoriously rebellious to say the least. Fallon cared little for rules or restrictions, she was not apt to neither follow them nor have them be instated in her life. Curfews were irrelevant, family dinners inconsequential. Even as an infant, when she was not acting of her own accord, Fallon was colicky, fussy, and hated nothing more than to be held – a sentiment her mother constantly like to remind her of.

While philosophizing about her own significance, which she could not help but mock herself for, Fallon stopped to take a deep breath. She felt the gravel of the pathway crunch beneath her feet, reminding her of where she was. She made a sharp right turn and found herself in the center of the park, greeted by flowers that seemed out of place for this time of year. Fallon was constantly curious about why the city of Dublin insisted on planting flowers at times that made it impossible for them to thrive. Tulips in the middle of March? You had to be completely ignorant of any law of nature to believe those blooms would survive Ireland's endless winters.

She made her way to O'Connell Bridge, her favorite part of the park. Fallon crossed to the center and took her usual spot looking out over the water. The Green was not the largest park in Dublin by far, Phoenix Park dwarfed it by acres, but there was something about the smaller-scaled view that gave the park a more comfortable feel. She crossed and uncrossed her ankles, gave the male passerby a soft smile, and looked around the corner for a friendly child. No such luck today. That was curious.

She walked across the remainder of the bridge, catching the intermingled scent of freshly mown grass and a woman's perfume. Rounding the corner, she was just about to exit through the gates, when she heard the muffled sound of someone crying. And there she was. Without fail she was always there. Sitting, watching, waiting. For as long as Fallon could remember, Old Woman Sheridan, as those who frequent the Green liked to call her, would sit on the same bench, day after day, lamenting some unknown tragedy. What exactly that sadness concerned, however, was an unsolvable mystery. Nobody knew, or cared to know, why this woman was so distraught. She was just left to her own pitiful condition. *Homelessness*, Fallon thought to herself, *why is it that in a nation of people esteemed for their hospitality, we have such an issue with those who are unable to provide for themselves?* The issue of those who lived on the streets was Irish taboo, to say the least. Upon trying to discuss it with family at one point, her mother had gone tight-lipped and changed the topic with such speed it was almost alarming.

The elderly woman's mood was contagious. Whenever Fallon strolled by, she could hear the echo of the woman's muted sobs and see her frame shake under the pressure of so much emotion. The grey skin of her hands emerged beneath her shawl and laid flat on her knees. She was hunched over, weighed down by her own grief. In between shudders, her entire body went limp. Clearly she had exhausted herself to the point where she could no longer even be tense.

The scene made Fallon want to cry herself, which is not a sentiment she often experienced. Pity was not in her nature. *What is it about this woman?* Fallon silently willed. Day after day she passed this figure on her walk, and her curiosity never seemed to ebb. It was uncanny.

Children had told stories about Sheridan for as long as Fallon could remember. One of her first Irish friends, Aoife Callahan, had believed Sheridan was a witch, “You can’t be in the park alone with her, Fallon, she’ll cast a spell on you and you’ll be sent to some foreign world. She’s got powers, that’s why she sits there, just waiting for someone to wander around alone so she can snatch ‘em!” Fallon smiled to herself, remembering the scary stories that were always being passed around. She still noticed them in the park today, little fingers pointing cautiously in the way of the old woman, hands cupped to cover whispers between two friends. Fallon’s skin prickled as she looked over at the sad bench. Off put by Sheridan, Fallon picked up her feet, which had been become one with the pavement, and finally made her way out of the park.

Today felt different. The air was crisp with the onset of fall. One would not classify it as cold, but certainly not warm. The wind came from an obscure direction, almost in a cyclical manner, the clouds shifted at odd paces. Today was different. Fallon watched as couples strolled by, her thoughts turning back to her admirer this morning. It was funny how little she thought of Riley. They were seeing each other, after all, but so rarely did his name pop into her mind. She had known Riley since the day she arrived in Dublin. They had locked eyes from across the street and he had approached her with such fervor it was almost overwhelming. Even at age ten, Riley knew what he wanted. For reasons unbeknownst to Fallon, her boyfriend worshipped the ground she walked on. He appreciated her looks, she was sure, but other than that she was unsure of how she had become the centerpiece of his life. On a few different occasions she had intended

to end things with him, just break it off and spare him from her complete lack of emotional vulnerability. But, without fail, he remained at her side, her knight in shining armor.

Fallon had entertained other guys throughout the years, little flirtations, a kiss or two with some lucky guy at a pub, but Riley was constant. He was of medium build, with dark brown hair that fell directly into light green eyes. His olive skin tone left all fairer Irish girls consistently jealous, while his charm and candor made him an instant catch. Riley's laugh was contagious; a mix between a chuckle and all-out guffaw that no one – even Fallon – could help but enjoy. He was one of those types who always had a folded up paperback in the pocket of his jeans. It was bound to be something by Joyce or Maya Angelou, someone prophetic. Fallon could never understand how Riley could read the creased pages that were forever crushed in his back pockets. The covers were always worn, the titles illegible, stained with coffee and grease. When questioned, however, Riley would give his infamous shoulder shrug and sideways smile. He was nonchalant in the ways that Fallon was not – whereas she was a rebel without a cause, Riley was a people-pleaser, loved and praised by adults far and wide. Fallon was quite sure the only times her mother enjoyed her presence was if Riley was by her side.

As of late, there had been talk of the inevitable, looming, next-level of their relationship. Riley had never pressured her to do anything she didn't want to, but intimacy was not exactly Fallon's strong suit. She could flirt and entice, but succumbing to the feelings of someone else made her insides knot into a ball. She could feel her stomach contract at the mere thought of exposing herself in that way; it threatened to leave her powerless, out of control. That was a possibility Fallon did not care to entertain. She had kept Riley at bay for this long, but as they neared the end of secondary education, the pressure was mounting, whether Riley directly confronted it or not. Fallon did not doubt her feelings, as she knew Riley was probably the one

thing she remained attached to, but sacrificing her status within their relationship again made her feel physically sick. She intended to string him along, however cruel that may be, for as long as time would allow.

Fallon shook her head, physically getting rid of the thought. Ideas like these made her feel weak, another thing she could not fathom describing herself as. Fallon knew what she wanted, what she liked, who she liked, that was all that needed to be said. She ignored the voice in the back of her head telling her to let go. She suppressed it with such force, intending to keep it below the surface forever. How long she could keep her conscience quiet this time was the real question of that matter.

CHAPTER 2

A cold breeze lifted Fallon's loose curls off of her shoulders, making the hairs at the nape of her neck stand on end. She wrapped her leather jacket tighter around her, fighting the biting wind with the thin defense she had. She thought of having this breeze breathing on her neck all day, plaguing her like it must Old Woman Sheridan. Another shiver crawled up her spine. Fallon uncrossed her arms, the only thing holding her jacket together, and imagined herself on the beach where her family used to vacation while still living in America. The cutting Dublin air faded away, replaced by a balmy haze, draping like a blanket across Fallon's bare shoulders. She closed her eyes and felt herself lying in the sand, completely lost in the warmth of the beating sun, which remained undisturbed by the presence of any clouds.

All of the sudden a drop of water splashed on her nose, so cold it shook Fallon from her reverie. Rain. Back in Dublin, Fallon forced herself back to reality and her thoughts immediately directed her towards the elderly woman. *Why am I so hyper focused on her today?* Fallon had always been curious about Sheridan, sure. She'd let her gaze linger on the old woman on occasion, trying to decipher why it was that she cried, conjuring up stories about a lost love. *She's just some woman in the park*, Fallon thought to herself, *just let it alone*. But for some reason, she couldn't.

Fallon left school in a complete daze, heading home still haunted at the prospect of interacting with Sheridan again. Just then, someone grabbed her from behind. Fallon's whole body went taut, rigid at the foreign touch. The grasp, clearly one of a male, tightened around her midsection, pinning her arms so tightly to her sides she couldn't move. But then there was the sound of laughter and Riley's voice in her ear. "Gotcha," he whispered in a sultry tone that implied he had her in more ways than one.

“Riley, damn it, I wish you wouldn’t do that! Let go.” Fallon’s tone sounded harsher than she had intended it too; she realized it was the first time she’d spoken a word all day.

“Well someone’s a little perturbed today. Jesus, Fallon, lighten up.” Riley’s demeanor changed as he let go, his shoulders drooping post-reprimanding. Fallon breathed in, silently willing herself be kinder. Life would be easier if she could just hate him. But there he stood, in all of his glory, a copy of *Celtic Mythology* peaking out from his back pocket. His gray thermal hugged his body in just the right way, it was the kind of shirt that gave you the ever so slight idea of what was underneath. His tattered jeans were a mix between dark and light wash, not too tight, and hanging low on his hips. She could just make out the line of his boxers above the waist.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been distracted all day, you just scared me, that’s all.” The look of pain lingered on his face, but slowly faded as Fallon interlocked her hand with his. She watched his shoulders shrug, releasing the tension between, reluctantly slinging an arm across her narrow shoulders. She let herself give into his touch. Ironically, she no longer felt the need to keep him at a distance. His hand gripped her arm, surprised and excited by Fallon’s physical reciprocation.

“Whaddya say we get out of here?” Riley jerked his head in the direction of the school’s gates. Fallon responded with a small grin as she let herself fall into step with her boyfriend. They made their way onto the sidewalk and headed back towards Rathmines.

“How was yer day?” Riley asked, rubbing her arm in an effort to keep her warm.

“Average, nothing out of the ordinary,” Fallon responded instinctively. Yet this felt like a lie. Something had changed today. She had felt it this morning in the air and she still felt it now.

They neared closer to St. Stephen’s Green and Fallon felt her attention wane away from whatever Riley was chattering about. She made sure to nod her head occasionally, keeping him under the illusion that she was paying attention. She caught something about the importance of

studying mythology and murmured a soft “Uh huh,” but her gaze was locked on the gates ahead. She was lost completely in thought when all of the sudden, Riley’s hand slid from her arm to her waist, then to her hip. His hand lingered there, looped in the belt of her jeans, his fingers momentarily grazing the millimeter of skin exposed beneath the hem of her leather jacket. Fallon sprung away from him as if he had shocked her. The feel of his touch on her skin had broken her focus. He’d pushed too far.

The look of pain was back on Riley’s face. He hung his head and raised his arms dejectedly, “Fallon, I know you haven’t been listening for the past six blocks, I had to do something to get your attention. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to freak you out. I just figured...I don’t know, I thought maybe you would be okay with it. Something felt odd when we were leaving school. You were almost warm for once—” Fallon’s eyes widened and she walked on, leaving Riley standing on the sidewalk behind him. He’d realized his mistake as soon as the words had left his lips, but Fallon had no time for his apologies today.

“Fallon, please! I didn’t mean it like that!” He knew better than to follow her.

Fallon turned on her heel, motivated to get as far away from Riley as possible. She was fueled by an inexplicable form of anger. She had let him hold her, responded to his touch. But now she felt nothing but rigid as he reminded her of how cold she could sometimes be.

She caught sight of the large arch signifying the opening to the Green. She walked down Grafton Street, so busy and full of life, and felt nothing but disdain for everything that surrounded her. The fiddles and drums of the street performers deafened her, the leering smiles of the older men looking for tips only serving to increase her pace. Her heeled boots hit the cobblestone pavement with a purpose, attempting to carry her to the Green as quickly as possible. She neared a jog.

Finally reaching the arch, she walked under it, almost breathless from her “workout.” Once on the other side, however, Fallon felt at peace. Her breathing slowed, the music of Grafton Street no longer audible from where she stood. A sense of calm cloaked her and she no longer felt the pangs of anger she had upon leaving Riley. She inhaled the perfume of tulips. *What is going on with me today?* Fallon could not wrap her head around all that had transpired since her morning lap and here she was again, in the same place she started. Her entire day was a blur. What had she even fought with Riley about? Had she fought with him? The only thing she could focus on was the Green.

She took her usual route around; her feet knew the way and led her effortlessly towards O’Connell Bridge. There was less than the usual amount of people in the park for this time of day. Normally there were children on their way home from primary school, wandering the park, feeding the ducks or playing makeshift games of rugby. There were always joggers and businessmen in suits chattering away on their mobiles. But the Green was silent. The leaves of the hedges ruffling in the wind were Fallon’s only companions in the otherwise uncomfortable silence. She continued walking, suppressing the nagging feeling that her visit was incomplete.

Rounding the corner, Fallon stopped dead in her tracks. Her feet had again brought her face to face with the old woman wrapped in rags, making no attempt to muffle her sobs with the little clothing she had. It was not sympathy she felt for the woman. It was something else. A need for answers, maybe. Throwing away all caution, Fallon approached the woman, instinctively kneeling so as to catch the gaze of her hung head. The convulsions didn’t stop, even when Fallon placed a gentle hand upon Old Woman Sheridan’s knee. Tears flowed and landed on the top of Fallon’s hand. They seemed to have a strange pinkish tint, but she felt inclined to leave her hand upon the woman’s lap. Silent communication.

Several minutes passed and the park remained still but for the muted sobs of Old Woman Sheridan. Feeling the need to establish a connection in the absence of words, Fallon muttered a muffled, "Hello." The word felt empty and stupid. Fallon silently berated herself for not thinking of something more insightful to say. She was met with no reply, not even so much as a gesture to insinuate the woman had heard her greeting. Disheartened, Fallon sat back on her heels, her hand still lying carelessly upon the woman's lap. For the second time today, Fallon was brought back to the present by an icy drop of water.

Looking up, Fallon blinked at the gray sky, not surprised by the sudden storm, but irritated it had interrupted the one chance she had to communicate with this mysterious figure. Reluctantly, Fallon rose to her feet and slowly rescinded her hand. As she did, the woman reached out and grabbed her wrist with such force Fallon felt as if the bones in her hand may be crushed. Letting out a highpitched yelp, Fallon tried desperately to extract her hand from the woman's grasp. Flailing and terrified, Fallon was trapped. The woman had clearly not lost her strength in the absence of food. Sheridan's head remained hung, but tears ceased to fall. Only rain. Fallon was getting soaked as each second past.

Blinking through the sheets of rain, Fallon called out, "Please, let me go! I was only trying to talk to you, I'm sorry." Her own voice sounded empty as the rain came down harder and harder. She could barely make out the woman's shape anymore. Completely helpless, Fallon whimpered. There was a dampness on her cheeks that was not from the rain. Tears were free flowing down Fallon's face uncontrollably. Tears were the ultimate form of weakness; they were concrete evidence that you felt something.

Fallon echoed the sobs of the woman, completely distraught, "Please, for the love of God, LET ME GO!" With that, she noticed the woman's form flinch the slightest bit, as if she had

finally heard Fallon's plea. Fallon, nearly choking on a mixture of rain and her own tears, trembled as she tried to maintain her composure. Slowly, the woman began to raise her head, which was still guarded by the hood. Pale skin, tinged with age, but not completely absent of beauty, could be seen beneath the shade of the hood. Fallon could make out the blue veins on her neck, like tiny snakes edging through milky sand. The woman's eyes were so swollen from crying, Fallon assumed they would remain permanently closed. But at that moment, the woman exposed her gaze, one so bloodshot it was a wonder whether they were composed of blood entirely.

Paralyzed by terror, Fallon's feet stayed planted on the ground, her hand still intertwined with Old Woman Sheridan's. The woman's lips parted, mumbling something Fallon could not quite discern, "What? I can't understand you, please—" Fallon was interrupted by the woman's lips, which were moving at a rapid pace, mumbling gibberish or some sort of incantation. Fallon tried with one last feeble attempt to extract her hand and unwillingly this time, fell back to her knees. The rain continued to come down.

Desperate to get out of the park, Fallon looked around for anyone to come to her aid, but she'd seen no one since she had walked through the arch. Even if someone were still lingering inside, Fallon was sure she would never be able to even discern a figure through the rain, which was coming down in thick sheets. Aoife's voice rang in her head and for the first time, Fallon actually feared the old woman. The tales of her witchcraft had always just been myth, but Fallon couldn't help but think back to them in her current predicament.

Just then, Fallon heard the old woman muttering something under her breath. "What?" Fallon called out to the red-eyed woman. Her inaudible monologue stopped entirely and again the woman was silent, still staring into empty space, refusing to meet Fallon's gaze.

“Please, I don’t know—” the woman’s eyes shot up to meet Fallon’s.

“My baby” the woman echoed, this time with force, “MY BABY!” she wailed with so much gusto, as if she hadn’t spoken the words in years. Fallon held the woman’s gaze, one so riddled with the lines of loss and the wrinkles of mourning. She inherited her pain almost instantly. It knotted up in her chest and began to eat away at her, as she was sure it had been eating away at Old Woman Sheridan. The woman’s grip tightened and then loosened, finally allowing Fallon to rescind her outstretched hand. The rain stopped.

Fallon was bewildered. The storm had come and gone, like any Irish rain, but the world had morphed from day to night. There was no clearing of the clouds, no comforting rainbow, just the sense that someone had absentmindedly flicked off the light of day. The park was most certainly going to close any minute, if it hadn’t already. The gates to St. Stephen’s are manned by guards and close promptly at dusk every evening. Fallon hadn’t stayed this late in the park since she and Riley had been children, refusing to quit their game of rugby with the absence of the summer sun.

Almost instantaneously, she heard a man’s voice behind her, “Park’s closed, mam, best be on yer way out.” It was a command, not a suggestion. Turning towards him, breaking her gaze for the first time with Old Woman Sheridan, she gave him a curt nod indicating she understood. She turned back to face the bench, but was shocked to find it vacant. Fallon did a double take, making sure her eyes didn’t deceive her. She did a full one-eighty, momentarily facing the guard, who still loomed in her presence. *There is no way she could have left and I would have missed her. I didn’t break her gaze for less than an instant. Surely I would have at least heard her walk away,* Fallon considered. The guard cleared his throat.

“Apologies, sir, but did you happen to see where the woman who was sitting here got off to? I meant to say goodbye.” The guard looked confused.

“There was no woman there, miss.”

Flashing her best grin, she followed up, “You must have seen her, she was there when you walked past. I was just talking to her.”

Evidently not under Fallon’s spell, the guard’s look of confusion slowly morphed to one of skepticism. Figuring he must frequent the park and therefore know the regulars, Fallon tried again, this time adding a flutter of her lashes, “It was Old Woman Sheridan, she’s on that bench every day.”

“You’re too young for the pints, girl. And why are you soaked through? You been for a dip in the lake?” Chuckling at his own joke, he grabbed her arm, guiding her forcibly towards the exit.

“It was raining – I was still in the park without a coat or umbrella, clearly you had one,” Fallon retorted, irritated she had failed to entrance him.

“There was no rain and no Old Woman Sheridan, girl, no one’s seen her today. Go get yourself a hot cup of tea and stay away from the pubs tonight.” He huffed, looking back at her with nothing but annoyance.

CHAPTER 3

Fallon exited the gates, no longer under the spell that had drawn her in. Completely bewildered by the guard's immunity to her charm, Fallon retraced the events of her visit with Old Woman Sheridan. She hadn't imagined it – right? That would be completely absurd. But then how would the guard not have seen her? *Sheridan garners enough attention, and I already saw her earlier today, obviously he must have just been mistaken. But what about the rain?* Fallon fingered the sleeve of her jacket and found it still soaked from the impromptu storm. Yet his uniform remained dry. Fallon continued to mull over her thoughts and made her way down Harcourt Street towards Rathmines.

The air was colder than it had been during the day. Fallon pulled her jacket tighter around her, but the damp leather did little to keep her warm. The streets were dark as Fallon pressed on, and she noticed not a single soul passed her by. She picked up her pace, wanting to be home more than ever, tucked away safely in her room. Dublin normally felt like the friendliest city on earth, but the silence of the night and recent events unnerved Fallon. Finally passing the comforting graffitied walls of Bernard Shaw pub, Fallon's flat came into sight.

Her brisk pace became even quicker as she entered the code to get into her building. Hearing the magnetic click behind her had never been so comforting. Taking a moment for herself, Fallon closed her eyes and leaned her head against the cold metal of the door. She could feel a chill course from her scalp down the back of her spine, reassuring her of her location and that this bizarre day had finally come to an end.

Peeling herself away, Fallon made for the steps. Her family's flat was on the sixth floor, but Fallon didn't mind the climb. Maybe a little bit of exercise would compensate for her already racing heartbeat. The door to flat 6B came into view and Fallon was happy to find the door

unlocked. She walked into the kitchen, slung her jacket over a nearby chair and let herself melt into the leather couch her mother had had shipped all the way from Atlanta, Georgia. Fallon couldn't always understand her mother's frivolity with fine things, but the buttery upholstery on her bare shoulders felt too good to question. With that, her mother appeared in the doorway, ever wary of Fallon's return home. "Good evening, Fallon, glad to see you've finally made your way home from school. Where have you been all this time?"

Fallon returned her mother's inquiry, confused, "What do you mean? I made a brief stop in the Green on my way home, but I left right from school."

Mrs. McMahan heaved a dramatic sigh, "Fallon, it's nearly 8 o'clock. You haven't missed curfew so I don't understand why you feel the need to lie. A 'brief' stop at the Green is a bit of a stretch, don't you think? Were you at Riley's?"

Darting her gaze towards the microwave to verify her mother's claim about the time, Fallon sank back into the couch, more confused as ever.

"No, I wasn't, Mom. I can't—I don't kn—" Fallon broke off.

"I've had a long day, Fallon and I don't care to argue with you about your whereabouts. I was mainly curious—we haven't seen Riley in quite some time. I was hoping you would bring him by at some point this week. I just picked up a copy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that I think he might like. I was just browsing at Camden Street Market and I found this copy with little notes in the margins and an introduction by M—" Fallon tuned out her mother, she knew she would continue to prattle on about Riley, and who could really blame her? The two cared more for the classics and literature than she ever would. The differences between her and her mother were too numerous to count – it wasn't as if she wanted to be dissimilar, it was just the way things worked out. Her mother was still talking, something about Oscar Wilde and the

connection between youth and beauty, but Fallon had long since perfected the art of conscious head nods and “uh huhs” to make it seem like she was paying attention.

Picking herself up off of the couch, still nodding her head, Fallon realized how famished she'd become. The last time she'd eaten had been the crumbly scone at the café – most of which ended up clustered at the bottom of her coffee. Moving towards the fridge as if it had some sort of magnetic pull, Fallon opened the doors to find barely anything of substance. Clearly browsing for books had superseded her mother's outing to the local Tesco. Slamming the door to emphasize her displeasure, Fallon decided on a cup of tea and some biscuits to satiate her hunger – dark chocolate covered HobNobs would always do the trick. She filled the kettle to the brim with water, assuming her mother would fix herself a cup as well if Fallon did the dirty work and took the time to heat up the water.

She found herself in a daze, eating the first cookie in two bites, but taking her time and nibble at the edges with the second. Fallon's thought drifted back to the park for the first time since she'd left. What on Earth could Old Woman Sheridan be talking about? A missing child? That wasn't so much a common theme as it was back in the states. Fallon had seen enough episodes of Law and Order to know the ins and outs of kidnappings. Fallon's train of thought shifted to a lost baby as in a miscarriage, perhaps, a baby that never was? She felt it fair to rule abortion out – that would have required transport out of the country and Fallon knew that had probably never been within Old Woman Sheridan's financial capabilities. But losing a child before birth could definitely cause some of the emotional damage Sheridan seemed to be eliciting. Yet, Fallon felt a twinge indicating that there was more of a connection. There had been a relationship that had gone beyond that of the womb – she was sure of it.

Leaving her mother to discuss the misunderstood values of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* on her own, Fallon grabbed the sleeve of cookies and her now steaming cup of tea. God knows there wasn't any milk in the house, so Fallon made do with the bitter taste of the cabinet's ancient *Bewley's* brew. She balanced her loot in one hand and slowly made her way down the hallway, to the last door, straight ahead.

Her room called to her, begging her to enter the safe haven promised within. Fallon gently twisted the knob and pushed the door to enter her sanctuary. The room was dimly lit – which Fallon preferred – with the sole source of light emanating from the twinkle lights her mother had kept in an old box of Christmas decorations. They didn't have much functional use in the apartment, so Fallon claimed them as her own, hanging each strand with care vertically from the ceiling. Also hung were white sheets Fallon had draped in a way to create a more comfortable atmosphere. Her mother had refused to let her paint the walls – *“If we decide to sell it, I'm not wasting time repainting, white is classic, hang some posters.”* – so she managed to be innovative with the decrepit sheets her mother saved for company. Fallon had spent countless hours attempting to achieve the perfect flow from the ceiling, tacking and re-tacking the sheets to her ceiling until her fingers stung.

Framed by the cloud-like drapes and strands of lights was Fallon's bed, nestled perfectly in the back right hand corner of her room, just below a large window. When her family had moved in, her father gave Fallon free rein to choose her room, which, much to Fallon's chagrin, did not include the master bedroom. Disheartened but not completely deterred, she remembered walking into this room and immediately feeling a connection. She had wandered around the perimeter of the room tracing her fingers along the wall, forming some sort of unspoken bond. It was not until she got to the window, however, that she truly felt like a puzzle piece fitting

seamlessly into place. The height of her apartment building and their convenient location on the top floor provided the McMahon family with a bird's eye view of the surrounding city of Dublin. From where she stood, Fallon had a straight view the Grand Canal. She could also just make out the tops of the gates to Saint Stephen's – a factor that solidified her choice.

Fallon strode towards her bed, placing one jean-clad knee on top of covers, followed by the next. Looking out the window, she was greeted by nothing but the darkness of night and a sprinkling of the few metropolitan lights in the distance. Dublin, being the capital of Ireland, was a city in its own right, but couldn't really hold a candle to other European capitals Fallon had visited. The city had an antiquated feel, the atmosphere was not so much romantic, but definitely one tied to a past: traditional. Dublin Castle is located right in the city-centre, after all. She took a long look at the city outside and couldn't help but feel an ebbing sense of loneliness. It wasn't often that Fallon resented solitude, but things had proven to be different today.

As if on cue, her mobile lit up, the name *Riley* glaring at her from the screen. She grabbed the device, debating whether or not she felt calm enough to answer. It had been her fault for starting their argument, she supposed, acting so rash on the walk home. But still, she couldn't move past his constant need for more attention. She didn't want to resent him, but an unwelcome knot of anger in her gut reminded her exactly why she'd become so frustrated to begin with. She pressed the home button, sliding her finger across the screen, silently dreading the contents of the message. An apology. Of course. *Fallon I'm sorry for what I said today. I was out of line. Tea at 250 Square tomorrow morning? Let me make it up to you.* Fallon groaned and threw her phone towards her pillows. She wanted the satisfaction of throwing something with force, but not the trouble of replacing a cracked phone screen.

She almost would have preferred it if Riley would just stay mad for once. She racked her brain for a time they'd had a "real" fight: one where he hadn't surrendered, waving the white flag with his tail between his legs. There had been an occasion where she refused to read a book he suggested, and for some reason that had particularly irritated him. Even then, though, Fallon remembered his sheepish gaze looking up at her the next day at school, shaming her into forgiving him without further consideration.

Shaking her head for probably the twentieth time today, Fallon decided to remove Riley from her thoughts for the remainder of her night. She grabbed her tea, which had since cooled, and moved over to her desk. The flat surface was haphazard. A physical representation of Fallon's mental processes. Biscuit crumbs and empty mugs were pushed to the side, scrap paper with song lyrics and to-do lists strewn carelessly about. Her own organized chaos. Fallon willed her ancient laptop open and waited for the Wireless Connection to establish itself. She brought her mind back to Old Woman Sheridan and wondered yet again why she felt such a strong need to solve this mystery. *Maybe I'm afraid of being that old bag lady sitting alone in the park, having scared enough people away.* The consideration seemed valid, but Fallon also couldn't help but wonder when her beauty would wane and if it ever would. *Maybe I would enjoy going unnoticed for once. I'd make an effort not to cry and make a giant scene like Old Woman Sheridan, that's for damn sure.*

The little WiFi symbol indicated a full connection and Fallon perked up at the ability to search for some answers on the Internet. It was certainly a stretch, but Fallon found herself typing in the phrase "lost children in Ireland" and hoping for the best. The results took what felt like an eternity to load and Fallon felt stupider than ever. Of course nothing was going to turn up.

Yet, there it was, staring at her in the face, an entire slew of sites and links proclaiming to have information on not even just lost children, but lost *babies*. Fallon straightened her posture and clicked on the first link she saw. The screen changed to an article written for BBC about a pre-production documentary. Fallon quickly skimmed the article, still in awe that her random search had managed to produce so many results. She hit the back button and scrolled further down the search page. She noticed articles entitled “The Catholic Church Stole my Child” and “More Mass Graves of Irish Tots” that seemed almost too terrifying to be real. Fallon hesitantly clicked on the latter site.

How had she never heard of this before? Babies being *disposed of* in mass graves? She was familiar with the Magdalene Laundries, or course, it wasn’t necessarily something the Irish people were proud of bringing up. But nevertheless, the topic left remains of a scar on the country’s otherwise good Catholic name. She remembered one of her instructors at school glazing over the subject, uninterested and uncomfortable when attempting to discuss it. “Those girls were sent away for their own good,” had been her choice of words.

The Laundries had been home to “wayward” young women. Fallon hated that term. What did it even mean? As someone entirely aware of her own body and its abilities, she could never understand how other people could intercede and tell her how to act and how to treat something that is rightfully hers. Fallon felt her train of thought wandering and attempted to refocus, typing a new search to refresh her memory about specific laundries. The search engine popped up with a definition as soon as she typed in “Magdalene Laundries.” Fallon clicked on the link, reading the plain text as quickly as she could.

Also known as Magdalene Asylums or Mother and Baby Homes, these Irish institutions were home for young Irish women throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. The homes

mainly hosted “fallen women” who had either become pregnant out of wedlock or had been found to work in prostitution. Shunned by their families, women who were sent to these laundries were forced to work as free-laborers, often under the supervision of Irish-Catholic nuns. Pregnant women were sent to these homes to have their children in privacy, having been ostracized by their families.

Many cases have been brought to the public attention, with women accusing the nuns of abusive practices. Mothers were often separated from their children, who were in turn raised by the nuns until they could be put up for adoption. Often, the mothers did not consent to this process. It has also been suggested that children in these homes may have suffered from malnutrition, leading to illness and subsequent high infant mortality rates in several homes. Physical and verbal assaults have been reported since the discovery of these practices and many victims have since called for apologies from their abusers.

Fallon leaned back into her chair, completely bewildered by what she had just read. This information was common knowledge, yet she had been blissfully unaware. *A Catholic education.*

Could she have really stumbled upon the answer to Old Woman Sheridan’s riddles this easily? *It’s 2016. I have no idea how old Sheridan is. She could be over a 100 for all that I know. But if this one institution was functioning until 1961, who’s to say Sheridan wasn’t sent to one just like this?* It certainly made logical sense. A lost baby? A resulting life of solitude in a public park? The pieces seemed to fit together a little too nicely.

Taking a second, Fallon considered what she was doing as she typed in “Sheridan, mother baby home.” With each keystroke, Fallon’s breath quickened. It seemed like a long shot, seeing as she didn’t know exactly which home Sheridan could have stayed in. There were too many for her to limit her search. Trying to employ some yoga-style breathing techniques, which

she had never been particularly good at, nor had she ever had much use for, Fallon pressed the return key. And just like that, the death records were staring her down. Shaking as she scrolled through the results, she finally clicked on a link that had “Sheridan” highlighted in the subscript. Names of children like McNamara and King popped up, the latter noted as only having lived for 7 hours. *7 hours.*

And there it was again. The name Sheridan. Public domain. Free knowledge for anyone who cared enough to take a second to look. Making sure she was seeing things correctly, Fallon scrolled back to the top of the page, which cited the death records for a small mother baby home on the outskirts of County Galway. She searched again for the history of the home, unable to find anything more than information about recent renovations. The home, still referred to as Saint Abran’s, also still served as housing for present-day nuns. Before she knew exactly what she was doing, Fallon opened a new tab, typing in “transportation to Galway” and clicked on the first link that popped up. A few more strokes and Fallon successfully purchased a train ticket to Galway, leaving first thing in the morning.

CHAPTER 4

Fallon's eyes popped open at the first note of her alarm. She smacked the top button with her hand to silence it before anyone else could hear. Her mother would definitely have questions as to why she needed to wake up at six a.m. On any normal day, Fallon got up a mere five minutes before having to leave. She didn't require the time to primp—some lip balm and a pinch of her cheeks were the extent of her beauty regimen. Maybe a piece of toast on the go if she was feeling peckish, but generally she brushed her hair and teeth and was out the door with a curt nod to whoever happened to be lingering in the kitchen.

Today, just like yesterday, was different. Fallon's train left in an hour and she had to make her way to Heuston Station. She had printed her tickets last night, not willing to take even the slight risk that tickets would be sold out. Grabbing a black jumper and dark jeans, Fallon slipped on her selections and took a second to observe herself in the mirror. Similar personality traits were rare, but not nonexistent between her and her parents. Looks on the other hand, could not have been more opposite.

Her mother was not squat, but was tiny enough to be considered "short" by anyone's standards. She wore her light yellow hair cropped, highlighting a friendly face and large brown eyes. Pretty, but not beautiful. Fallon also loomed over her mother, which she knew bothered her more than she cared to admit. Fallon had at least five inches on her mother, who stood at a petite five feet and two inches. As soon as they had moved to Dublin, in fact, Fallon had experienced a rapid growth spurt and grown over three inches in a matter of two months. Her father said it must have been something in the Irish air.

Fallon's green eyes had always been her favorite trait, but a recent overheard conversation between her mother and her aunt still ate away at her. "She almost looks evil, Peg,"

her mother had been speaking candidly on her mobile, unaware Fallon was home at the time, “those green eyes are a like a snake’s. Every time she looks my way I feel as if she’ll hiss or shoot venom at me or something.” Fallon stared at her reflection, willing her eyes to open a little more, having detested being likened to a poisonous snake. The girl in the mirror stared back. Fallon felt her stomach do a flip having remembered her mother’s cruelty.

Fallon’s thoughts drifted to her dad. She hadn’t seen him in what felt like weeks. Whereas her and her mother were somewhat combative with one another, Fallon had a soft spot for her father, who seemed to understand her on a level that others could not. Wary of her, absolutely, he knew when to leave her alone and rarely challenged anything she had to say. He wasn’t a pushover, necessarily, but kept a reasonable amount of distance. Mr. McMahon preferred the isolation of his study, otherwise known as the guest room, which her mother had spent tireless hours converting. She remembered the look on his face when her mother opened the door upon completing her interior design masterpiece. He gave his wife a smile that exuded so much appreciation that no words were necessary. Her parents had a symbiotic relationship, to say the least.

Fallon often wondered if her mother regretted designing a perfect Shangri-La, as her father spent nearly every waking moment at home shut within it. Fallon understood the desire to be alone, but her mother’s social nature often seemed pained by his isolation. Every evening, for as long as Fallon could remember, her father would come home from work, kiss his wife on the cheek – never the lips – and recede to the study. Her mom always had the same pained look, a pursing of her lips and a downward glance, but just for a split second. Then it was back to bustling about, cleaning things that didn’t require cleaning and nagging Fallon until she too, felt the need to recede to the privacy of her own room. She felt a sting of pain for her mom, whom

she just couldn't seem to make sense of. Maybe she would ask Riley to come over when she got back from Galway, a nice chat with him would most likely do her mom some good.

Fallon swung the backpack she had packed carefully the night before over her shoulder and grabbed her purse from the hook on her door. She gave herself one more look in the mirror before pushing her door open and walking briskly to the kitchen. She opened the fridge, planning to grab a few slices of bread to sustain her for the day, when she heard a muffled "ahem" from behind her. Her mother sat at the counter, clad in her bathrobe, blowing on her morning tea to cool it down. "Good morning, Fallon," she said with a raspy tone that indicated these were her first spoken words of the day. Fallon could not remember the last time her mother had called her "honey" or "sweetie". Always just Fallon.

"Oh, hi Mom. I, um, I didn't expect you to be up this early."

"I'm always up this early, I have tea and then I take Wilde for a walk around the block. But I could say the same to you. You've decided to take more than a couple of minutes to get ready today?" She blew on her tea again. Fallon knew she had been caught.

"Yes, actually," she had to think on her feet. *Something, anything*, "I'm meeting up with Riley to go over our biology homework. You know that's not my thing," Fallon added a light-hearted chuckle, hoping to make her white lie seem more sincere. Her mother nodded, skeptical, but unwilling to challenge anything where the prodigal boyfriend was involved.

"Oh, well that's nice. Do tell him I send my best." Her mother stared down at her mug and Fallon almost felt herself ask if everything was all right. *Snake-like*. Fallon rolled her shoulders back, grinned, and walked out the door. What her mother didn't know wouldn't hurt her. *It never does*, Fallon thought cynically to herself.

Trying to make up for lost time, Fallon quickened her pace and crossed the street to the bus stop. She stood waiting for the 27A and took a look around her. A woman walking past dropped a glove on the ground, being far too engrossed in whatever was on her mobile to notice her loss. Fallon debated running after her, but the woman had progressed at such a fast pace, she wasn't even sure if she would catch her. Nobody else waiting at the stop made a move to catch her either. Were people indifferent to her loss? Or just not willing to wait for another unreliable Dublin Bus to make its route?

Soon enough the bus rolled up, a plump old man sitting at the helm. He gave Fallon a once-over and flashed a toothy grin. Fallon swiped her bus pass and made her way to the upper level, out of sight from his rearview mirror. It was a trick she had learned as a result of experience. Nothing was less enjoyable than catching the constant reflection of two eyes staring at you for a twenty minute bus ride.

Claiming a seat and throwing her bag down next to her, Fallon devised a plan of attack. Once she successfully made it to Galway, she would buy a ticket for the next train to a smaller town called Salthill, which would then put her right where she needed to be. Proud of her own resourcefulness, Fallon settled into the seat and let her thoughts drift to Old Woman Sheridan. She still didn't understand her own need to find an answer to a homeless woman's plight. She hadn't taken any time to consider her rash decisions, acting purely on instinct and impulse.

The bus pulled up to Heuston and Fallon disembarked through the backdoor. Another trick of the trade. Walking through the doors, she found platform nine and waited for her adventure to begin.

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Fallon arrived in Galway after a relatively smooth cross-country train ride. There had only been one screaming baby, which Fallon took upon herself to remedy by smiling at her from across the aisle.

Galway was one of the more beautiful counties in Ireland, Fallon believed, and made her feel even closer to nature than she did in Dublin. Sure, she had the Green in the capital city. But Galway had the appeal of being surrounded by water, with the inlet only a few steps away from the small city-centre. If Fallon wanted to see the ocean closer to home she would have to travel to smaller seaside towns like Howth and Dun Laoghaire.

Getting off the train, Fallon found herself on the outskirts of the city and sad at missing the chance to explore downtown. Refocusing herself on her mission, Fallon purchased a ticket from a particularly cheerful attendant and waited for her platform number to be called.

She still couldn't quite believe that she had made it here, nor was she sure how she was going to go about researching Old Woman Sheridan's potential stay at this mother baby home. St. Abran's was no longer functioning as a home for women, but strictly housed nuns; Fallon had at least taken the time to find that out. So why exactly was she intending to go? Fallon mentally kicked herself for not doing more research before travelling all the way out here. She could have at least placed a phone call to find out how to locate records or death certificates. Maybe someone could have even sent them electronically, through an email or something. Fallon's posture slunk a little bit; she felt stupid, recklessly impulsive. It had been as if something had taken over her body and forced her to come on this excursion, which had a questionable purpose.

Fallon also considered the reliability of the little information she *had* found. Sheridan was not exactly a "rare" Irish surname; the odds that it had been another child not related to the Old Woman Sheridan were exponential. *What was I thinking? Should I even venture all the way*

to Salthill? Oh my god, what if Sheridan is her married name? Did she have time to get married before she decided to spend her days alone in the park? If she's a widow I guess that would make even more sense.

Fallon dropped her elbows to her knees and cradled her chin in her hands, contemplating her next move. She reached into the back pocket of her jeans and stared at her latest train ticket. The train was scheduled to leave within the next fifteen minutes. *What the hell? I'll just go.* Fallon stood up and moved to the center of the station where the platforms were listed. 9:45 to SALTHILL – PLATFORM 6. Fallon's backpack seemed to have gotten heavier as the day went on and she hadn't even been carrying it for that long. Maybe she would need to start going to the fitness center at some point. Fallon chuckled to herself, *never going to happen.*

A piercing whistle announced the train's arrival at the platform and Fallon boarded her second train of the day. In under an hour she would arrive in Salthill, the small seaside town where St. Abran's was located. She made a beeline for a seat closer to the front, facing forward, by the window. There was something unsettling about sitting backwards when moving forwards; it always left Fallon with an odd sensation. It was like when her mother made her drink water upside down to get rid of her hiccups as a kid – what was the point? It was unnatural.

Right as she sat down, she felt a vibration from the inside of her bag. Fallon dug for her mobile, that name *Riley* popping up yet again. She had forgotten to answer him last night. Bracing herself for whatever the message was going to say, Fallon clicked the home button, lighting up the screen. She slid her thumb across Riley's name, exposing a series of four individual messages. The top one she had seen before, but she wasn't sure how she could have missed messages he had apparently sent this morning. Maybe she had had bad reception on the train leaving Dublin.

7:00 *Want to grab something to eat before class today?*

7:27 ?

8:35 *Where are you? Are you sick or something? I thought we could talk at some point today.*

9:54 *Why are you ignoring me?*

His desperation made Fallon physically and emotionally exasperated. She threw her phone to the side and crossed her arms. It was as if he wanted her to resent him. She could not understand his needs to keep constant tabs on her whereabouts. So she didn't show up to school one day, so what? Maybe she had overslept. Fallon spent the rest of the train ride stewing over her anger at Riley. She was tired of his puppy-like tendencies; maybe it wasn't just her inability to be intimate, but her lack of desire to be with him at all.

Fallon stared out the window at the passing scenery, wishing she could be walking through the grassy meadows and not confined in a speeding steel box. How nice the sea looked. Before she knew it, the train came to a stop in a ruddy little station no bigger than the area of her flat. The rusty sign hanging over the platform read "Salthill," indicating to Fallon that she had, in fact, arrived.

Fallon waited for the doors of the small train to pry themselves open and she made her way outside. *Now what?* Again, Fallon kicked herself for not printing out directions the night before. Praying that her mobile still had data for the month, she typed "Saint Abran's" into the map application. A little green dot popped up, creating a direct route from Fallon's current location to the abbey. According to her GPS, she was only a little over a two-kilometer walk away. Smiling and satisfied that something had worked in her favor, Fallon pulled her bag higher

up on her shoulder, and set out to the left. *Thank god I wore tennies today*, Fallon thought to herself as she eyed her black Converse.

The dirt road she walked down was completely empty, not a single car or person travelled down it for the first ten minutes of her walk. There was nothing but grass on both sides of her, aside from a few stone walls separating property. In the distance she saw a small cottage, but no light coming from inside. Fallon walked a little quicker. It was the middle of the day, the early spring sun shone overhead, yet Fallon could not help but feel uneasy. Even amongst the weeds and the greenery, she felt it necessary to reach the home that much faster.

As if out of nowhere, a large stone building came into view just above the horizon. Fallon moved towards it and shivered, realizing she had given herself gooseflesh in her anticipation. Tall wrought iron gates guarded the entrance to the building, which seemed to be in surprisingly good condition. It looked like a large manor, with two rows of eight windows spanning the façade. Through the bars, Fallon could see a royal blue door, which looked almost as if it were slightly ajar. Fallon reached the gates and decided to press her luck. She inhaled and exhaled before giving the gate a light push. Fallon was shocked when the metal gave and she was able to walk right through to the grounds. Checking to make sure no one had seen her, Fallon closed the gate gently and proceeded down a stone-lined path. She climbed the three steps up to the door, which was actually slightly ajar.

Fallon weighed her options. On one hand, she could just go in, maybe call out to see if anyone responded. On the other, she could knock and wait patiently for someone to come greet her. But what if they turned her away? What if they said they couldn't help her or that their records were confidential? The third option lingered in Fallon's mind. Maybe she could go in, not announce her presence, and just take a quick look around. Would that be considered breaking

and entering? The door *was* open. Fallon's rebellious spark stirred from deep inside her and a sly grin crept on her face. *What's life without a little risk?* Fallon willed the door to open slightly more so that she could slip in unnoticed. The door gave way under her weight, creaking somewhat as she pushed. Fallon froze, wondering how loud the noise had actually been. She listened for footsteps. When no one came padding towards the door, Fallon figured she might as well just go in.

In front of her was a large staircase leading to individual second and third floor landings. To her left was a door marked with a gold plaque. Fallon shuffled closer, trying to remain as silent as possible. Etched into the plaque was the name REGINA O'CONNOR and in subscript the title: MOTHER ABBESS. Much to Fallon's chagrin, this door was closed tightly. *Now what? I could knock, I suppose.* Fallon did another once over of the bottom floor. No other door bore any sort of signage, and a few had narrower doors – supply closets?

Fallon retired her strategy and lifted her fist. She rapped three sharp knocks on the door. At first, there was no response. Fallon waited for what felt like an eternity before she felt the need to knock again. Maybe whoever was inside, if there even was anyone, hadn't heard her. Do nuns use headphones? Fallon raised her arm again, but as she did, she heard the doorknob twist and a woman greeted her from the other side of the threshold.

"Can I help you, young lady?" The woman was dressed in the traditional habit, with a large wooden cross emblazoned on the white fabric that shielded her chest. She had kind eyes, wrinkled with age at the sides, but still a pretty shade of light brown. Her thin lips were parted slightly, waiting for Fallon to respond to her inquiry.

Flashing her widest smile, Fallon extended her hand, "Hi, uh, *Mother*, my name is Fallon McMahan, I am doing, um, a research project on the architecture of religious institutions and I

just wanted to visit one in person. I was wondering if maybe I could take a look around your establishment.” Fallon mentally patted herself on the back for thinking on her feet. *The architecture of religious institutions? Where did that come from?*

O’Connor seemed wary of Fallon’s suggesting. *Damn, did I not sound convincing?* Keeping a smile plastered across her face, Fallon anxiously awaited the nun’s response.

“Would you care to come in for a cup of tea, my dear?” Surprised at the invitation, Fallon nodded her head and walked past as the O’Connor gestured with her arm.

“Please, make yourself comfortable.” Fallon took a seat in a wooden armchair upholstered with mock red velvet. The cushion of the seat squeaked as Fallon sat down, causing her cheeks to redden.

“Oh these old chairs, they can’t even handle the weight of a wispy thing like yourself. Don’t you worry yourself about it for a moment. Even after the renovations we invested in this place, things still seem to creak and squeak when we don’t want to. How do you take your tea?” Fallon hadn’t even noticed O’Connor move towards a small kettle settled on a hot plate. She poured a generous amount into a cup.

“Black, please,” Fallon replied. Normally she would prefer a splash of milk and a bit of sugar, but she felt no need to waste time. Handing her the cup and saucer, O’Connor then took a seat in a rather regal looking chair behind her desk. The nun took a dainty sip from her cup before setting it on the small plate, leaving back in her chair, and giving Fallon a quizzical look.

“So, you’re doing a research project? For school I presume?”

Fallon licked her lips, knowing she was going to need to think on her feet, “Yes, it’s for school. My teacher is having us conduct these investigative projects before we take our exit exams.”

“Ah, I see. So you’ve turned up on our doorstep, or rather, inside our home, to take a tour?” The nun’s tone indicated she was less than pleased that Fallon had entered without permission. She considered revealing that the door had been open, but thought better of it. Playing dumb seemed like the ideal option.

“Yes, your institution is just one of many I plan to visit. I am doing my best to be thorough with my project.”

“Mm, well being thorough is always admirable. Why have you chosen to start at Saint Abran’s, if I may ask?” This is where things were bound to get tricky. Truth? Fabrication? Straight out lie? Fallon again found herself at a multi-faceted crossroads. She settled for the middle option; *some truth, some fibs—this isn’t an official church, right?*

“Well, I was doing some *additional* research regarding the mother and baby homes that were active during the early and mid-twentieth century. And when I started my research, Saint Abran’s came up as one that had been active at the time.”

O’Connor’s smile faltered, “That is not something we generally discuss with the public, my dear. I am sorry that we cannot be of much help in that department.” The nun interlaced her fingers and set them atop her protruding belly, a convenient resting spot. She had clearly seen right though the architecture excuse.

Fallon knew she would have to be skilled in her retort. She had not necessarily expected O’Connor to be responsive to her inquiries, seeing as the suspicions regarding treatment of the women who stayed at such establishments, “Oh, I understand. The media has been pretty tough as of late, have they not?” Fallon chuckled, letting O’Connor know that she was privy to the bad publicity.

O'Connor maintained her grin, clearly having underestimated Fallon. *Not every pretty girl is completely incompetent.* Fallon loved nothing more than proving herself to those who thought her looks were the only thing she had to offer.

O'Connor considered her response to Fallon's affront, "Yes, the homes established to take in unwed mothers have been cast in some negative light. We stand by our mission to act and carry out the will of God. As far as we are concerned, we did what was best for those young women, regardless of whatever accusations have been made."

Fallon could not help but find it strange that O'Connor did not technically deny mistreatment. Just that she had done "what was best."

"Well that is certainly understandable. I'm sure there are also those who appreciate the assistance you were able to provide them, as women with nowhere else to go. If I tell you that my research isn't generally concerned with the 'scandalous' aspect of your institution, would you be willing to answer a few of my questions?" Fallon reciprocated the nun's positioning, folding her hands neatly on her crossed legs, sending a return signal about her newfound upper hand.

O'Connor again seemed surprised by Fallon's finesse with negotiation. She turned her head to the grandfather clock looming in the corner. It was just after noon, "The sisters and I convene for lunch at approximately half-one, I will answer whatever I can until then. But make no mistake, I have no answers about anything regarding mistreatment of our charges or their children."

Beaming, Fallon responded, "Understood. I doubt what I have to ask you will even require that much time. I have a question about one specific woman. There is little known about her and my leads thus far have brought me to St. Abran's. I'm not so much interested in her time here, as I mentioned, but more so what became of her child. She has been distraught for as long

as I've known her, only able to speak of a 'lost baby.' Would you be able to tell me anything about her if I were to give you a name?"

"We had several women here during the time we had our doors open. I have records, but the possibility of there being more than one woman by a certain name is highly probable."

"Yes, I predicted that, but I did find a record of a woman with the last name Sheridan staying here. Would you have any record of what became of her?"

O'Connor considered this question and rose slowly from behind her desk. She shuffled towards two enormous file cabinets to Fallon's left, "Sheridan was the surname?" the nun asked, turning her head back in Fallon's direction.

Fallon sat up straighter, somewhat in disbelief that O'Connor was complying with her requests, "Yeah, *yes* that is the name." Fallon corrected herself, she wanted to sound as composed as possible.

O'Connor moved her gaze down to a lower drawer, moving slowly as she bent over to open it. Her fingers pilfered a row of manila folders for a few seconds before she extracted a single file. O'Connor opened the file, scanned the contents and kept her eyes glued to it while making her way back to her seat, "There were three woman with the last name Sheridan that stayed here. One was a sister, a member of the order who worked and boarded here, I'm assuming that would not be who you were looking for?"

Fallon shook her head, that wouldn't make sense. If Sheridan had been a nun, she wouldn't have been permitted to conceive a child.

O'Connor continued, "Another woman stayed here in the earliest years of our establishment, arriving when she was fifteen years of age in 1923. That would make her, let's see, 108 today. You said you know her currently, correct?"

Fallon nodded her head, zero for two.

“The last woman arrived here in 1959, at age 16. That would put her in her early seventies.” Fallon’s ear perked up. That sounded right—perfect actually.

“Hmm,” O’Connor continued, “She did have a child, but it seems as if she passed early on, at six months—pneumonia.” O’Connor clicked her tongue, seemingly saddened at what she was reading, “The mother...she seems to have passed during her stay here as well. The cause of death was never determined, according to this she caught a fever overnight and passed quite quickly.” The nun passed the folder to Fallon. She stared down at the death certificate for Siobhan Sheridan, who passed away at age 17 in 1960.

Disheartened, Fallon mustered up the strength to speak, “Well, I guess that settles that then. Is there any way to find records from other institutions?” She hoped she hadn’t expired O’Connor’s patience. The woman turned towards the clock, which moved closer and closer to the lunch hour at an alarming rate. O’Connor heaved a great sigh, coming to sit in the matching armchair by Fallon’s side.

“My dear, you may as well give up this chase right now. First, you are not even positive that this woman stayed in a Laundry. Second, most abbesses are not going to be inclined to grant you the same charity that I have. The mother and baby scandals have made it that much more painful for us to exist and perform our duties. Others will not even allow you inside their establishments, unless, they too, happen to mistakenly leave their doors ajar,” she tapped Fallon’s hand and flashed a friendlier smile, “Even if you are to find where this woman stayed, the odds are her child may have passed during their stay or have been put up for adoption. It seems as if this woman might just be experiencing grief later in life. Your cause is noble, I am sure, but it seems like a substantial amount of effort for a school project.”

Fallon had no choice but to accept O'Connor's reasoning. She was right after all. *So much for a quick fix. This isn't a game of Clue, Detective Fallon, there isn't a simple, straightforward answer at the end of all this.* The minute hand on the grandfather clock ticked to the six and O'Connor rose from her seat. I would invite you to stay for lunch, but we are conducting a vote while we eat and the sisters have not been informed of your presence."

"No, of course, I understand. Thank you for your time." O'Connor nodded, wished her safe travels, ushered her out of her office, and then out the front door. The door lodged firmly into the jamb and Fallon heard the unmistakable click of the dead bolt.

CHAPTER 5

Fallon boarded the train headed eastbound back to Dublin. The trip from Salthill had been tumultuous. A sudden rainstorm had hit in the middle of what was supposed to be a short ride, and the rickety train shuddered with every gust of wind. The conductor had come over the loudspeaker to inform Fallon and the three other passengers onboard that they would be momentarily stopping to try and wait the storm out. Astounded, Fallon pouted, unable to imagine that public trains can simply “shut down.”

The stalling had forced her to miss the train she originally planned to take from Galway back home to Dublin, forcing her to buy a new ticket when the woman at the booth refused to exchange it. Fallon was really beginning to question her charming abilities lately. People hadn't proved as susceptible to her wiles lately.

The silver doors of the 7:35 train came to a close behind her and the bag on her shoulders felt that much heavier. The thick fabric straps dug into her skin, surely etching a bright red mark beneath her t-shirt. The throbbing pain mocked her. It weighed her down. She was back to square one. Fallon adjusted the weight and walked through another set of doors to the first seating area.

She collapsed in the seat, searching for the feeling of comfort that would never appear. The thin leather was littered with holes, exposing a yellowing foam flesh. Fallon picked at the peeling fabric, doing more damage to the already tortured cushion. It was no wonder these seats were so uncomfortable, the decaying padding could not have been more than an inch thick. She gave one last shift and finally settled into a position that didn't feel like she was sitting on a metal bench. Only three hours and she would be back in the city. Maybe things would return to normal. Maybe not. She closed her eyes and tried to forget the events that had characterized her last few days. But as she did, images of Sheridan's bloody gaze and the blue door of St. Abran's

flashed behind her lids like some sort of sick slideshow. Fallon reopened her eyes. Clearly sleep was out of the question in her current state.

In an attempt for mental distraction, she decided to make her way to the bathroom. An act of true desperation, as there were few things Fallon hated more than using the sad excuses for toilets on public transportation. Even more, she didn't want to leave her bag if she could avoid it. Perhaps the most troubling part was the idea of abandoning her seat, which she had actually grown quite fond of. It was strange how attached she could get to an inanimate object. But she had chosen that seat, it was hers, and she was unenthused with the idea of someone questioning her ownership. With reluctance, she left her seat, saying a silent prayer that it would still be unoccupied upon her return.

Navigating the narrow aisles of the train left Fallon feeling extremely ungraceful. She knocked into armrests, muttering constant "Pardons," as she tried to make her way to the end of the car. She looked around at her fellow passengers, an eclectic bunch. There was a mother minding her child, or rather wrestling with the little blonde to keep him at bay. The child cried out, pulled her hair, and jumped on the already pathetic looking seat. The mother, although challenged, wasn't backing down. Fallon's eyes locked with the child who immediately ceased his attack upon gaining her attention. Fallon smiled and shook her finger at him as if to say, *That's no way to act, now is it?* The child shrunk in an innocent form of embarrassment. The mother was baffled at the exchange, looking at Fallon with that typical mix of bewilderment and skepticism. The child, never shifting his gaze from his beautiful stranger, relaxed and nuzzled his head into his mother's shoulder.

Trying not to cause more of a scene, Fallon pressed on and made her way closer to the bathroom, which loomed in all its tiny glory in the distance. A somewhat disheveled man sat by

himself while a young couple mirrored him across the way. The man's gaze caught Fallon's for only a second and for the first time in a long time; Fallon felt a sense of uneasiness at the idea of male attention. She brushed the feeling off, finally arriving at the sad excuse for a toilet.

Upon relieving herself, she was greeted by a lack of soap or paper towels. Hoping wiping her hands on her own jeans would eliminate some of the damage, Fallon wiggled out of the vestibule and made her way back to her seat. She caught another glimpse of the mother and child, who seemed to have settled down, and noticed another woman, not much older than herself, staring lazily at her cellphone. The emptiness of the car was comforting to Fallon.

She had almost reached her seat when she noticed a patch of unruly black hair peeking out over the seat next to her own. Hadn't she just observed the surprising emptiness of this car? There were dozens of open seats, yet this intruder sought to take the seat that should have rightfully served as her footrest. Fallon eyed her bag in the overhead. She could sit across the aisle and still keep an eye on it, she supposed. No one would take it while she was so near. Moving towards a nearby seat, Fallon froze in her footsteps. *My purse*, Fallon thought, *I've left my purse right on the seat*. How could she be so stupid? She almost wished she had felt the need to touch up her minimal makeup in the bathroom, then she would not have left the purse and put herself in this increasingly awkward situation. Fallon felt another pang of anger, *Damn the Irish for being so honest. If I were in New York City, I wouldn't have had a choice but to take my bag with me*.

She realized she'd probably been standing in the aisle for too long and decided to just reclaim her seat. She'd been there first, after all. Maybe her new comrade would feel uncomfortable, realizing his mistake, and want his own seat anyway. There was still hope. She came upon the row and was surprised to see the disheveled man who she had noticed on her trek

to the toilet. Words caught in her throat. Fallon stared blankly, trying to draw a conclusion as to why he had made this move. Returning her silence with the smile, the man stood up, gesturing for her to resume her place by the window, “After you,” he said. His voice was smooth and something about it gave Fallon the impression that she had no other choice but to obey his command. She hesitated and the man’s easy smile faltered for a split second.

He wasn’t as unkempt as she had originally thought. His hair was tousled in a deliberate manner and his eyebrows hung over large amber eyes. It was as if someone had painted them, mixing the perfect amount of orange, yellow, and white on a palette, swirling them together over and over again. His chiseled jaw accented his smile, and his skin was smooth and unblemished. Fallon had never seen such a beautiful man. She felt her muscles relax slowly as she maintained eye contact and the guard she had previously lifted fell ever so slightly. He gestured yet again for her to take her seat. This time, Fallon obliged.

She wasn’t unfamiliar with men making advances towards her. The typical drunk making a grab for her ass, or a whistle as she walked past large groups of men. A simple hair toss and coy smile was normally enough to keep admirers at bay, but for some reason Fallon felt as if that would not be the case in this instance.

She scooted past him, doing her best not to make physical contact. Few things made her more uncomfortable than awkwardly grazing a stranger. The fact that her knees were trembling did not help her cause. She hadn’t taken notice of how large he actually was – not fat, toned to the point before one would be considered “bulky.” *Breathe and smile. Breathe and smile.* Her mantra played on repeat in her mind and Fallon willed herself to maintain an air of composure. Others rarely rendered her uncomfortable, but this stranger had a hold on her and her wiles were not going to win him over.

“Finn Bheara,” he said, extending a well-manicured hand. Fallon took it, making sure to return his firm grasp. She noticed the resulting surprise on his face. Clearly he hadn’t considered her a worthy match. Fallon felt a grin crawl slowly onto her face. *And one point for me.*

“So what brings you to Galway?” he asked, crossing his arms and sinking back into the decrepit leather seat. His smug look irritated Fallon.

“I don’t generally divulge my travel itinerary with strange men. Especially those who choose the seat right next to my own in an essentially empty car.”

She had his attention now. His smug look didn’t betray any look of surprise, it was almost as if he had anticipated a bit of spunk. He seemed pleased to engage in Fallon’s sparring match.

“Well, I liked this seat. I prefer a view.” Fallon cocked her head at him, ready to argue that he had taken the aisle seat with only a view of the neighboring rows and the doors ahead. Finn was silent, willing her to come to his intended conclusion. Fallon felt a bead of sweat form on her back when she realized exactly what he was insinuating by a “view.”

“What do you want from me? I have a boyfriend, so if that’s what you’re looking for, I can’t really be of much help.”

Finn laughed heartily, as if this was the most absurd proposition he had ever heard. Fallon felt herself blush and felt a little unnerved by his ability to balk at her suggestion that he would find her physically attractive.

“I didn’t ask to date you, Fallon, but merely to sit next to you while we make this cross-country journey. Surely you are accustomed to men making such propositions.” He crossed one leg over the other and angled his body directly towards her, folding his hands neatly atop his right knee. He had the cleanest fingernails she’d ever seen.

Things had gone from sketchy to scary in a matter of minutes and Fallon knew she was trapped between the window and her new companion. She had just gone to the bathroom; now her only viable out had been compromised. Fallon readjusted her position, betraying a sense of discomfort she knew Finn had intended to elicit.

“You have yet to answer my question,” Finn probed. Fallon knew she had no choice but to answer. Maybe when the conductor came round she could make a nonverbal plea for assistance, but for now she figured recycling her creative lie was her best option, “I had a research project for school and I thought it would be interesting to visit the sites I’m studying.” Fallon returned Finn’s grin, secretly satisfied with her own quick thinking. It wasn’t necessarily *untrue*; she had technically been doing research. *More like reconnaissance*, Fallon mused.

“And what is it, exactly, that you are so interested in?”

“The Magdalene Laundries.” Fallon retorted, failing to come up with another lie.

“Interesting. And which Laundry did you visit specifically?” Finn did not seem at all concerned with the personal depth of his question and Fallon lost her patience for a second time.

“Why is it, *exactly*, that you are so interested in my school project?”

Finn’s knuckles whitened as he tightened his grip on his knees. The train seemed so quiet she could almost hear his teeth grind against one another. He appeared to be holding his breath; challenged by someone he had previously considered subordinate, “And why is it that you are so combative?”

Fallon contemplated her response. This was a game she wasn’t used to playing. Normally she was able to exude a sense of calm that most people were too entranced by to challenge, “Not trying to be combative at all,” she signed, trying to act more relaxed, “but you have to admit, this is quite a strange interaction to be having.”

Finn looked at her again with a sense of admiration, his frustration fading slightly. Fallon again took notice of how *pretty* he was. His eyes pierced her in a way she couldn't understand, they seemed to be egging her on and demanding answers she didn't feel inclined to give.

“My, my, you are quite the bold one. I'm not used to women speaking so – freely – with me. I do beg your pardon for what you seem to have defined as rudeness.”

Fallon considered this “apology,” which was laced with so much sarcasm she could taste it. Finn was clearly aware of his own beauty and Fallon felt a little bit of disbelief at his willingness to talk down to her in such a manner. She made a move as if to get up from her seat, finally deciding she had had enough of his pompousness, but Finn reached a toned arm out, “Not so fast.”

Fallon's breath caught in her throat, “Ex-excuse me. I need to move past you.” Finn arm remained extended, “I don't think you're ready to leave just yet, Fallon.” Realizing she was trapped, Fallon sat back down, unable to think of another method for escape. No one was in her direct line of sight and the conductor had yet to make his rounds. He had to be coming sometime soon. The train had been moving for over half an hour already.

“What do you want?” Fallon posed this question for a second time, trying to coat her voice with more ice than she had a few minutes ago.

“I thought I made it quite clear that it was simply to have a conversation with you. Yet, here we are with you trying to run away from me. This is quite unusual.”

“Why would this be unusual?” Fallon exclaimed, aghast at his notion that she would openly have a conversation with a stranger, especially one as aggressive as he, “I don't even know you.”

Finn's most sinister smile now appeared and a twinkle in his eyes made Fallon's stomach do a literal flip. Were they greener than she'd previously noticed?

"Ah, you think we don't know each other?" he chuckled to himself, obviously on the other end of a joke Fallon was not familiar with.

"You just introduced yourself to me and I've never seen you before in my life, so yes, I am sure in saying that I do not know you."

"But I know you."

Fallon had lost all sense of control, finding tears brimming in her eyes for the second time in two days. *What is wrong with me?*

"Ah, dear Fallon, no need to become emotional," Finn straightened and uncrossed his legs. He took one longer look at her as Fallon willed her tears not to spill over her bottom lids, "You will know soon enough how we know each other. Just wait for me in your dreams."

What the actual hell? All of that bullshit and he leaves me terrified with a cheesy pick up line? Finn stood up slowly, taking the time to smooth out the line of his jeans, all the while never breaking eye contact. He nodded his head and turned swiftly towards the doors at the front of the car.

Fallon's breath remained caught in her throat. Finn finally looked away and made his way through to the vestibule, not turning back for a final glance as Fallon had expected him to. She blinked for what felt like the first time in centuries and as she did, Finn disappeared.

Fallon sat back into the uncomfortable seat once again, mulling over the puzzling interaction. She leaned her head against the cool glass of the window, attempting to self soothe without much success. She felt ugly. Never before had she met someone who rivaled her in looks, but Finn had been so beautiful, so on par with her visage. *Is this what being self-conscious*

feels like? The uncanny feeling Fallon had been experiencing resonated in the back of her mind. She thought back to his appearance. The tousled hair, the amber-green eyes—his features had almost mimicked her own.

She felt herself longing for someone's touch. Riley's touch, to be specific. She drew her jacket closer to her and tried not to ignore the nagging feeling of isolation. Only a few more hours and she could again be back in her room, away from everyone's stares.

Fallon reached for her purse, digging around in the black hole to find her mobile. No missed calls. No more follow-up texts from Riley. That was strange. She flipped back to their conversation from the day before and reread his apology message and the later ones indicating his concern. *God, I can be such a bitch. I can't even answer his apology?* Granted, her mind had been preoccupied what with traipsing cross-country, but Fallon's guilt enveloped her. She remembered how she felt only hours before, borderline hating him for just wanting to know where she was. Now all she wanted was to hear from him. *Why can't I just open up? He's so good to me and all I do is push him away and make him feel like he is constantly messing up.* Fallon drafted a new message, contemplating the right thing to say.

20:07 Hey, I'm sorry I haven't answered you. It's been a crazy day. Can we meet up tomorrow morning? xx Fallon

She stared at the text, conceding that she could probably sound a little bit more remorseful. She debated adding an additional apology or some sort of explanation, but then thought better of it. Her thumb tapped the send button and she locked the screen, wondering how long it would take Riley to reply. *Maybe I should keep my phone out, just in case anyone else wants to visit the seat next to me,* Fallon considered. But then exhaustion suddenly overwhelmed her. Her muscles

relaxed, coaxing her into a state of delirium, a blanket of sleep draping over her shoulders. She closed her eyes, willing her dreams to be absent of anything she'd experienced in the past few days.

CHAPTER 6

Fallon woke with a jolt, having had the deepest sleep of her life. The only other time she could remember falling into such a heavy slumber was when she and Riley stole a bottle of Jameson and split it between the two of them. The only thing that had been able to wake her up from that coma had been her resulting need to dispel said Jameson from her stomach. She couldn't decide if she just didn't remember her dreams or if she'd actually just stared at the back of her eyelids for three straight hours. The only image she had was of a thick black screen.

"HEUSTON STATION: LAST STOP," Fallon heard the loudspeaker boom. Quickly gathering her belongings, she realized she still had her ticket, un-punched, in her hand. Had the conductor never come around? That seemed highly unlikely. Maybe he hadn't wanted to disturb her? Also unlikely. *If I had known I could save the twenty euro fee, I would have.* On edge and ready to get home, Fallon slid out of her seat and made eye contact with the fussy child and his mother again. He extended his arms, opening and closing his fists; the universal sign for "hold me." Fallon looked down, not wanting to step on the mother's toes, but to her surprise, she sensed the woman moving towards her. *Dear Christ, not another confrontation. I think I've had my fair share for the day.* She looked up to make eye contact with the woman, who looked exasperated.

"Have we met before?" the woman searched Fallon's eyes for some sort of recognition.

"I don't believe so, I'm sorry I really better be on my way," Fallon deflected the woman who actually did look remarkably familiar. Fallon must have just taken a good look at her when she walked to and from the train's bathroom. Yes, that was definitely it. As she went to turn around, the child's tiny arms reached out of the grip of his mother and grazed Fallon's exposed neck. A shock went through her, "OW!"

The woman looked startled, “I’m so sorry, he didn’t mean to hurt you, he just seems so drawn to you and I’ve never seen him take to strangers like that. He’s normally a wee bit of a mama’s boy, isn’t that right, Finn?”

Fallon almost collapsed on the floor of the train, watching as the mother nuzzled her child. His eyes. Amber-green. He smiled again at her, a crooked grin that sent another shock through her body, “I have to go, please just let me go.” Fallon stumbled out of her seat, sprinting to the door, trying not to be sick. She turned her head to take one last look at the pair. The mother seemed startled; Finn just stared with a familiar grin.

Fallon shook her head violently as she stepped off of the train. She must be going insane. The names and the eyes were simply a coincidence. Finn was an extremely popular and traditional Irish name. But the eyes were what resonated. And that slight, intentional grin. Fallon put her face in her hands. Her backpack dug into her shoulders again, weighing her down to the point where she almost lost her composure. People were staring at her and she realized she was standing alone in the middle of the platform. Fallon pushed her way through people, not caring about the typical friendly nature of the Irish people. She needed to get out of there. She needed to get home.

Fallon hailed the first cab she could find and hoped for once her driver wouldn’t feel the need to strike up conversation. She had too much on her mind. Her luck, however, failed her. The elderly gentleman wanted nothing more than to know about her life and her siblings and what she was doing on this fine spring day.

“No rain, lovely day,” he mused cheerfully. Fallon pulled out her headphones, not caring whether or not he would overcharge her as a result of her being rude. She barked her address at him, stuck a bud in each of her ears, and stared out the window. *Should I go see if Sheridan is at*

the park first? It's midday, it's likely. I wonder if she's been missing since that day. No, I'll go home first. Unpack. Maybe I'll just give this up.

Fallon shifted her gaze straight ahead, eyeing the cabbie's license picture that was stamped on the back of the plastic partition. The car was moving at a remarkably slow pace, even in the traffic, which Fallon knew to be *Kieran's* way of getting back at her. She noticed him mumbling something to himself, something regarding pretty girls and their entitlement and Caitlin and her similar attitude. She caught his reflection in the rearview mirror and decided a smile was worth him upping his speed, at a least a little bit.

Fallon flashed a winning grin, cocking her head to the side and batting her eyelashes. Kieran's gaze softened. His previously squinty eyes widened and he returned her smile. She mouthed the words *long day* and a mutual understanding was established. His foot pressed the pedal that much closer to the floor.

Fallon leaned her head against the rest and silently willed Kieran to pick up the pace that much more. Finally, the cab came to a stop outside her flat and Fallon pressed the fare into the cabbie's hand. It wasn't generally Irish protocol to tip cab drivers, but Fallon knew she had to compensate in some sense. Kieran nodded at her and Fallon strode into her building, bounding up the stairs at a record pace. She rifled through her bag as she approached the door, feeling for her key, and tried to stop her hand from shaking for long enough to insert it into the lock. The click of the deadbolt turning was the most comforting sound she had heard all day. Fallon flung the door open, closed it behind her, and took a moment to catch her breath. *Finally.*

"AHM," Fallon's posture shrunk, her shoulders fell and she braced herself for confrontation, "And where EXACTLY have you been, Fallon? I've called your mobile at least forty times. You don't call? You just don't come home? I got a message from your school today

letting me know that you just didn't show up today. You blatantly disrespect me at every turn. You don't even so much as say hello when you come home from school or wherever it is that you spend your days."

"Mom, let me expl—" Fallon tried to interject.

"No, I'm not finished. Do you honestly think I don't worry? That I don't care about you? You're my *daughter* and *I love you*. When will you accept that?"

Fallon was almost paralyzed by her mother's words, "Do you, Mom?" Fallon tried to keep the edge out of her voice, but the stress from the day had rendered her unable, "You look at me like I *scare* you. Like I'm going to attack you, or better yet, HISS at you like a snake."

Her mother opened her mouth to speak, but thought better of it. She looked down at her feet and rubbed her hands on the leg of her jeans. Clearly she realized the conversation Fallon was citing, "I can explain that. I didn't realize you heard me talking to Aunt Peg, I had just had a long day and you wouldn't talk to me and I, I just couldn't—"

"Couldn't what, mom? Couldn't look at me like I'm a human and not some alien that you just so happen to cohabitate with?" Fallon's words tasted bitter coming out of her mouth, her tongue was sour, "I know I haven't been the easiest teenager, but who is? I just want space."

With that her mother looked surprised and then broke into a fit of hysterical laughter. She threw her head back, cackled as if what Fallon said had been then funniest joke ever told, "That is RICH, Fallon. RICH. You're confining your difficult nature to adolescence? You have made things borderline impossible since your birth. You were sick, colicky to the point where even your father's patience wavered, which you and I both know to be a rarity. It's not your fault that you were sick, we just wanted to help you and nothing we did could stop you from crying. As a toddler you would break anything and everything you could. You only used the word "no" if I

asked you to do something. And I think that was when I stopped knowing you. Your independence was astonishing. Do you know how many experts I talked to? You were feeding yourself by the time you were three, you didn't need me. You didn't need anyone or anything. And since then you have kept yourself so far from me, I'm surprised you remember who I am." Any trace of laughter had since disappeared.

Her brown eyes welled up, brimming with painful tears that had apparently been bottled inside, "Sometimes I wonder if you're even mine, the way you look at me."

Fallon's chest tightened as she took in a sharp breath, "So you love me, but question whether I'm yours?" her anger mounted again as the doubts she had had about her mother crystallized, "Maybe I kept my distance because you made it so clear that I was different. That's unacceptable, right?"

The look on her mother's face was exasperated, "You are different, Fallon, both you and I know that. You always have been. I brought you home and you were the most precious thing to me. I never wanted to let you out of my arms, not even to let your father hold you. You smiled and opened your eyes at me and I have never loved anything more. But a few days passed and you didn't smile anymore. You were cold and didn't like to be picked up or held for so much as a second. Have you ever wondered how that made me feel?"

Fallon turned away, no longer willing to play a part in this discussion. She could never put into words why she acted the way she did. She would not let her mother see her cry right now. Fallon made her way towards her room and ignored the muffled whimper behind her.

Never before in her life had she experienced so many awkward encounters in a single day. What was going on? She made her way to her bed, her head reeling from her mother's words. She fell on top of her covers and let her body fall slowly on top of the duvet, her head

hitting the pillow last. She lay there with her eyes closed, unable to process anything. She inclined her head to her right and noticed something glittering on the adjacent pillow. The nice thing about the low Dublin skyline was that it didn't prevent moonlight from streaming in through her window. And tonight was a supposed to be full moon, she remembered.

Fallon picked her head up and turned towards the right side of her bed. Placed on top of her pillow was an ornate silver comb. The metal almost glowed, its sheen only exemplified by the strong pouring of moonlight. Fallon sat up and rolled the comb through her fingers. The handle was cut in a swirling pattern with a large green gem placed in the center. The metal was so thin Fallon feared it would disintegrate in her hand. She had never seen anything like it before. It couldn't be her mother's, right? Something innate told her she shouldn't ask.

Fallon stared at the green jewel. It was almost the exact color of her own eyes, a rich emerald speckled with dots of gold. Instinctively, she ran the comb through her hair. The metal glided through each individual strand leaving behind some of its sparkle. Fallon ran it through again and again until her whole head of hair shined with the same luminescence of the silver. She got up to look in the mirror and admired her black tresses. Fallon felt regal, beautiful. The previous insecurities she'd felt that afternoon evaporated, and Fallon straightened her posture.

Again, she was overwhelmed by a sudden sense of exhaustion. The day had caught up to her. Taking one last look at the comb, Fallon moved back to her bed, closed her eyes, and let sleep take over.

It took a few seconds before Fallon realized she was asleep. She was no longer in her room. In front of her loomed a gigantic forest with trees stretching as far as she could see to both

her left and her right. Trying to take a step back, Fallon's body bounced off of an invisible force. She was pressed even closer to the edge of the trees now.

"Where am I?" Fallon said out loud, having meant for it to remain in her own head. Instinctively her hand flew to cover her mouth, she had given away her location. Someone was looking at her. She could feel it. All of the sudden a familiar laugh echoed through the trees, blowing through them like an audible wind, bending the branches and the leaves this way and that. The tone threatened her. *Wake up Fallon, this is just a dream. Just wake yourself up.* This time she managed to keep her voice within her head.

"Fallon, you are not dreaming," a female voice explained, coming from behind one of the nearby trees, "Well, I suppose maybe you are, but the choice is yours." The voice carried along the edge of the forest, leaving Fallon unable to determine where it originated. Fallon turned herself around, clamoring to find the source.

"Where am I? Who are you?" Fallon called, no longer attempting to keep things to herself. Clearly that was not a foolproof way to stay hidden.

"You are at The Veil," the voiced called again. Fallon's head was spinning in time with her body. As if sensing her uneasiness, a woman clad in a floor-length grey cloak manifested from within the dark recesses of the woods. Fallon knew better than to try and run. The woman's face was concealed, a black pool framed by the hood, "Don't be afraid. We've been waiting for you, my love."

Fallon was immobile, waiting for the figure to come closer, "Who are you?" she called for a second time.

The woman returned with a melodic laugh, so unlike the one that had penetrated the trees before. Her cloak was now just inches away from grazing Fallon's palm, which she had extended

in a desperate attempt to distance herself. Slowly a pair of ivory hands exposed themselves from beneath the draped sleeves and reached up to pull back the hood. Fallon took a sharp inhale as the thick fabric fell to the woman's shoulders, exposing a waterfall of snow-white hair.

Fallon raised her eyes to determine whom exactly she was facing. Instantaneously, she knew who had brought her here; the likeness was unmistakable. It made no logical sense, yet something told Fallon the countenance on which she gazed belonged to someone she had met before. Someone she had come to know very well.

Fallon swallowed the lump that had lodged in her throat and gathered her composure, "I wondered when I would see you again, Ms. Sheridan."

CHAPTER 7

Sheridan smiled with such youthful grace; Fallon was astounded. Gone were her withered wrinkles, her ever-present red, swollen eyes, and defeated posture. Fallon had no way to estimate approximately how old Sheridan was at the current moment, as she defied all sense of reason or definitions of age. Sheridan nodded her head in acknowledgment of Fallon's address and offered her an eerily translucent arm. Fallon, seeing no other option but to accept, allowed for Sheridan to link her arm with her own and place another on her waist.

"I'm so happy that you have finally made it here. I see you successfully received my token," Sheridan stroked Fallon's still shining hair. Fallon reacted defensively, her hand reaching to find the jeweled comb carefully embedded in her hair, pulling the left side of strands out of her face, "Oh yes, Fallon, you are just as beautiful as the last time I saw you. Incomparable. Come along with me."

Fallon could feel something change in the air: a warm breeze enticing her to accompany Sheridan into the forest. She considered extracting her arm from the woman's grasp, but it was just as strong as it had been just yesterday in St. Stephen's Green. Fallon was not going anywhere but straight. She nodded her head, allowing herself to be enveloped by the trunks of the trees, feeling her skin warm as vines brushed along her arms and ankles. More warmth filled Fallon, starting in the bottom of her feet and filling her up until she felt completely at ease.

Sheridan was still smiling, utterly pleased with Fallon's decision to move forward, "I am guessing you would like to know why you are here."

Fallon's eyes had been closed, as she let the luxurious humidity of the woods take her over. But upon hearing potential for explanation, Fallon's trance was lifted, "Yes, yes I would."

Sheridan stroked Fallon's hand, her clear nails blending in completely with her complexion, "Have you ever felt different? Estranged from those around you? Never completely at ease?"

Fallon nodded her head again and tried to keep her cool.

"Well, my love, that is due to the fact that you were never intended to be a part of the human world. You are not human at all. You are a faerie, born in our world and later temporarily exchanged."

"I'm a...a what?" Fallon stared blankly at her comrade, blinking as she tried to process this news, "Faeries? As in the mythical creatures?"

"Precisely. Although, as I am sure you have since gathered, we are very far from mythical," Sheridan grinned, elated at her chance to provide this information. She pulled Fallon along, deeper into the woods with each passing moment.

"I'm not sure I'm understanding this. I've grown up in Dublin, in a city, with my parents. If what you say is true, how is it that I came to leave the faerie world?"

"That is a more complicated question," Sheridan replied, still maintaining a tight grip on Fallon's arm, "I will explain this in further detail when we arrive at our destination, but quite simply, you were sent into the human world as a changeling."

"A what? I'm a faerie, but now I'm a changeling?" Fallon's hand went to her head, trying to coax it to stop spinning.

"Fear not, you will have more answers soon enough. A changeling is a faerie that is sent to replace a human child, who is then sent to live in the faerie world. The child is immersed in our society, fawned over and looked after by all of us communally. We are much more successful in caring for them than any human is," catching herself, Sheridan loosened her grasp

ever so slightly and flashed another grin at Fallon, “What I mean is, we take them in for their own well-being, they need us. And we need them.”

“So, the humans I’ve been living with, my *parents*, are not actually my parents? And I replaced their child?”

“Yes, a few days after the child was brought into the human world, you two were exchanged.”

Fallon’s thoughts shot back to her argument with the woman she thought to be her mother. *You are different, Fallon, both you and I know that. You smiled and opened your eyes at me and I have never loved anything more. But a few days passed and you didn’t smile anymore.* Fallon could not help but feel a sense of underlying relief. There was a reason she felt the way she did, there were reasons for her disconnect. Sheridan gave her a moment to process before continuing; “The child birthed by your mother lived here among us for a while. She was a lively little thing, as I recall. But humans are unable to survive here for extended periods of time. She grew tired eventually and confused as to where she was. At the point she was...taken care of. Nevertheless, you have returned to us and that is what truly matters.”

Fallon fumbled for the right words, “I just can’t quite grasp this. I mean I always have been different, I suppose...” her words drifted off, unable to formulate a complete thought.

Sheridan’s all-knowing smile returned and she lifted Fallon’s chin with her slight fingers, “My dear, have you ever noticed that you feel more at ease when among the trees and the natural world? Or what of children? They are enraptured by you, are they not? I would surmise they follow you around, eye you, and that you reciprocate a form of calming control.”

“Do you know this from seeing me in the Green? I mean yes, the park is my favorite place to be and yes, children do seem to take a liking to me, but I never really thought anything of it. I just noticed it and accepted it.”

“And of course, your beauty, which I have already drawn attention to earlier. You are one of the more marvelous of our kind, a gem many will be spiteful to regard,” Fallon thought she noticed Sheridan’s smile falter slightly, but she could not be sure of anything she was seeing or hearing at the current moment, “but those occurrences and feelings are not mere coincidence. They are indicative of your nature as a true member of the Other World. We faeries have long been esteemed for our innate connection with the Earth. We have established a mutual respect with the serenity nature provides. Children, are also drawn to us, their mutual serenity and innocence allows them to integrate with our society. They have yet to be corrupted by the evils and boastfulness of grown humans. They recognize in you the ability to communicate, to understand. They seek to please you.”

“I—um—I guess. I’m sorry I just can’t seem to gather my thoughts.” Fallon thought of the little faces that had followed her around for as long as she could remember. She had been attractive to them? The whole principle seemed absurd.

“Understandable, my dear.”

“So, if my human parents are not my *actual* parents, do I have family here? Is that a possibility in the faerie world?” Fallon felt her voice break off, catching in her throat in fear of the potential response. She was not sure if she would rather have a family with whom she didn’t mesh, or no family at all.

Sheridan’s smile grew from a grin to expose two rows of dagger-esque ivory teeth, “I have been waiting for you to ask me that, Fallon. I have been waiting to tell you for quite some

time as well.” The woman paused, eyeing Fallon as if to get a clearer read, “You are mine, my dear. My child, taken from me to live in the outside world.”

At this, Fallon’s body went limp. Her knees buckled and for once she was grateful for Sheridan’s inexplicable strength. The woman caught her before she hit the mossy ground and led her to a nearby tree, which Fallon gladly rested all of her weight upon. It was a few moments before Sheridan spoke again, “I understand this is trying for you, Fallon. I did not sacrifice you by choice,” she lowered her voice, “You were not supposed to be sent. Another was meant to go in your place.

Her mother pulled her away from her tree, coaxing her along the way, “I intend to give you the full story. How I intervened and what is currently being done. I travelled through The Veil to the human world as a banshee, I was disguised as the haggardly woman to hide my true self and confined to the park which I came to know you frequented. My crying was intended to attract your attention, to warn you and eventually bring you back to the veil. My plan was solidified only after I was successful in leaving my trinket upon your pillow. I knew you wouldn’t take it from me being the stranger that I was, forcing me to act in a rasher manner than I intended. As soon as you touched the comb and ran it through your hair, you would be able to return to us upon sleep.”

Fallon had regained her stride during her mother’s speech, but still remained confused, “Why now? Why have I spent so much time amongst the humans then?”

“Have you forgotten that today is your birthday, my sweet child?” Sheridan gave a melodic giggle, “In the human world you have just turned 17, and you are fully grown. When you are a child, you can only pass through The Veil between the two worlds once. There is no

reverse exchange with changelings. You, however, are royalty, and we maintain *special* privileges.”

“Royalty?” Fallon’s breath quickened with this onslaught of information, “What am I?”

Sheridan’s smile remained on her face, “Why you are a princess, my dear, of the Connacht faeries.”

As if out of a movie, Fallon felt herself in complete and total disbelief. *I’m some sort of twisted Cinderella?*

“Calm yourself, Fallon,” Sheridan clearly sensed her child’s stress, “We will arrive shortly. Finn Bheara and the rest of the population are anxiously awaiting us.”

Finn Bheara. Fallon had only heard such a unique name once before—on a train travelling from Galway to Dublin.

CHAPTER 8

Fallon felt herself gliding alongside Sheridan. Her feet merely grazed the ground as the pair moved quicker and quicker through the woods. The trees were unlike any Fallon had ever seen before. The bark seemed to glow with lines of gold and silver laced from the roots to the branches. Different species of flowers sprouted from the leaves, their blossoms opening ever so slightly as Fallon and her mother walked past. They seemed welcoming, a warm gesture that she had finally arrived home.

Yet with the comfort of the vegetation came the fear of facing the man she had encountered on the train. Did he seek her out? Had he followed her there? Were they even the same person? The names and the insane nature of Fallon's current situation seemed to eliminate any possibility of this being a mere coincidence. Fallon allowed her companion to steer her further into the forest, willing herself not to panic unnecessarily.

Suddenly, Fallon found herself face to face with the most amazing structure she had ever laid eyes on. A large palace constructed by plants and roots seemed to sprout directly from nature, growing organically with all that connected it. The windows were overlaid with an opaque sheen, framed by twisting branches and vines. Lush green moss crawled up each side like a blanket, and Fallon longed to reach out and feel its inevitable softness. There was light emanating from within; exuding a sense of comforting welcome that Fallon had not always thought to be associated with faeries.

"Welcome home," Sheridan whispered, her breath tickling the nape of Fallon's neck. The woman stepped in front, beckoning for Fallon to follow her down the path to the entrance. The door was slightly ajar, reminding Fallon of Saint Abran's. Fallon almost laughed out loud at how misguided she had been in her attempts to solve Sheridan's puzzle. The wooden door opened

without any touch and invited the pair in. Upon stepping over the threshold, Fallon felt her skin tingle. Looking down at her arms, she noticed a luminescent sparkle highlighting her skin; she was glowing.

Realizing Fallon's confusion, Sheridan explained, "Just the faerie way of welcoming you back. It's a special piece of magic. The trees are sharing with you." Fallon thought back to the gold rivers she had admired running through the bark on their walk, realizing the same sheen ran through her skin.

"Come along, there are many who I know have been anxiously awaiting this moment." Sheridan guided Fallon deeper into the paths of the castle, all of which seemed to be lit by an untraceable light source. Fallon ran her free hand along the walls, which were covered with a thin layer of moss, comforting to her fingertips. As she moved further and further inside, Fallon felt a growing sense of power, her breath became more even and her shoulders naturally rolled back to straighten her posture. Sheridan noted this change, standing straighter herself and loosening her grip on Fallon's arm ever so slightly, trusting her that much more.

The pair came to the end of what seemed like a mile long hallway and were greeted by a pair of ornate doors. Thin branches raced through the pair of purple glass windows and prevented Fallon from seeing whatever was hidden behind them. Two wooden knobs waited for the pair to push them open.

"Are you ready?" Sheridan looked at her with so much intensity, Fallon almost felt her confidence falter—almost.

"I don't think I've ever been more ready." Sheridan's knowing smile indicated it was time to make their entrance.

“You do the honors, my child.” Sheridan extended her ivory arm, gesturing for Fallon to open the door herself. Fallon’s stomach unknotted itself as she grasped both handles and gave the doors a firm push.

At once, Fallon was blasted with the brightest light she had ever seen. Momentarily blinded, Fallon instinctively closed her eyes and reached her hands up as a shield. When she felt the brightness dim, she lowered her hands, peeling her eyelids open ever so carefully. To her great surprise, Fallon found herself greeted by the most beautiful creatures she had ever seen. Filling the space from the left and right were what seemed like thousands of winged creatures, all with their gaze locked onto Fallon. Roaring cheers overwhelmed her as she took in her surroundings. The hall she had entered was enormous. The domed ceiling allowed for the bright light Fallon had originally experienced, but her eyes slowly adjusted and remained open. Strands of gold leaves hung from the walls and ceilings, intertwining with one another in a seemingly endless fashion. The walls were covered from floor to ceiling in mirrors, making the scene even more impressive than Fallon had originally perceived.

A thin pathway had been cleared as Fallon entered the room, with faeries stepping back from the center to allow for her to pass through. Fallon felt a slight tap on her back. Sheridan wanted her to walk forward. Taking the hint, Fallon willed herself to put one foot in front of the other and make her way down the middle of the great hall. As she moved, the room felt silent. Faeries who had selected a spot on either side of Fallon’s path reached out to graze her skin ever so slightly. With each touch, Fallon felt a spark run through her. It was not akin to a shock, but felt almost as if every touch excited some sort of inner magic. Fallon’s chest swelled and she let her hands fall naturally at her sides. Midway through her walk, she paused, as she felt another

one of Sheridan's taps. Turning her head, however, she saw no sign of her faerie mother. She was alone.

Fallon reached one hand up to her shoulder blade, unsure of what or who had touched her. Upon doing so, Fallon felt a thin sheath streaming from the right side of her back. She snapped her own hand away, unsure of what exactly was going on. She remembered all attention remained on her. A particularly beautiful girl to Fallon's left gazed up with admiration, "Your wings, Fallon." The faerie lowered her head quickly, indicating she felt as if she had spoken of out turn. Fallon felt a smile wander onto her face and she reached her palm out towards the girl. Bending to her level and lifting her chin, Fallon shared with her a smile, *thank you*, it indicated. The girl colored deeply, and Fallon felt even more secure in the role she was intended to play here.

Fallon stood back up and again reached her hand to her shoulders. Trying not to betray any sense of unfamiliarity, she braced herself for what she was about to feel. Sure enough, Fallon thumbed a thin mesh that felt almost fake. From her peripherals, she could just make out the span of her newfound wings, which glowed from another unknown source. The light lilac tone was so beautiful Fallon could not help but gasp. Her wings fluttered of their own accord, as if responding to her subconscious admiration.

For the first time since entering, Fallon also noticed that she was no longer wearing her own clothes. Long gone were her tennis shoes and jeans, she instead looked down to find herself clad in a gown that just touched the floor. The material clung closely to her body—a second skin. Just like her wings, the gown had a purple tinge, resembling an opal or another glistening gemstone. Fallon pushed forward and tried not to overthink everything she was experiencing. *Be in the moment.*

She closed in on the front of the room, which was occupied by a remarkable golden chair, which Fallon could only assume was a throne. *Does it belong to Sheridan? To my mother?* It finally dawned on her that if she was indeed a princess that made her mother a queen. However, Sheridan was nowhere in sight. The only figure she could make out had his back to her. Whoever this faerie was had black hair almost identical to the shade of her own. Fallon braced herself for whomever it was she was about to encounter. Clearing her throat to announce her presence, she waited for the stranger to reveal himself. Ever so slowly, he turned, a familiar smile extending from one ear to the other. Finn Bheara.

Fallon took a step back, the encounter having taken her off-guard. Finn chuckled, maintaining the same superior air he had when they first met on the train, “Hello, sister.”

“*Sister?*” Fallon exclaimed before she could stop herself. She had attempted to keep her composure upon entering the hall, but this was something else.

Finn laughed again, “You mean mother didn’t tell you? Shame.” He looked down at his bare feet and back again at Fallon, “Trust me, I think I wanted to see you again even less than you wanted to see me.”

“Finn, that is enough,” called a familiar voice from behind the throne. Sheridan emerged, even more beautiful than before. She was now clad in a gown similar to that of Fallon. Lilac wings framed her delicate figure and a crown placed ever so carefully upon her head. A familiar green jewel was fixed in the center, a duplicate of the one Fallon had admired in her comb. She reached to the left side of her head to ensure the comb was still intact.

Sheridan continued, “Your older brother has not learned from his past mistakes, Fallon, which is why it is so important that you’ve been returned to us.”

Finn snickered, giving his mother a look akin to a petulant child.

“It is time for answers,” Sheridan offered her hand yet again, directing Fallon to a smaller, yet still decorative, chair beside her throne. The entirety of the faerie population looked on, silent in anticipation of their queen’s speech.

Sheridan looked out at the crowd, her green eyes scanning the hall in its entirety as she began, “As you all know, our princess, my daughter, has been returned to us today.” Yet another cheer boomed, sending echoes off of the mirrored walls.

Sheridan waited patiently for a few moments before raising a hand to call for silence. “We are overjoyed at her return, as she was not intended to inhabit the human world in the first place. My first born, Finn, was intended to go and replace the child of a family who had wronged our tribe.” Fallon’s ear perked up. *My family?* She ran through possibilities in her head about what her mother, or her father for that matter, could have done to inspire vengeance.

The faerie queen continued, not mentioning anymore details regarding the human world, “It is the duty of the eldest of the royal blood to fulfill such roles as changelings if need be. However, the night he was expected to travel through The Veil, Finn tricked his younger sister into taking his place. She was sent instead to the human world, unable to return to us until she reached full maturity in human years. She has lived for precisely 17 years amongst the humans, unaware of her true role amongst us. Finn was so kind as to send her without anything to remind her of where she truly belongs.”

Fallon turned to her “brother.” He crossed his arms and maintained a look of contempt, refusing to turn his visage towards Fallon.

“Normally we faeries travel with tokens from our world. A talisman, if you will, that allows us to travel freely through the veil. Without one, Fallon remained isolated on the other side. As you all also know, we may not take more than one token with us, therefore eliminating

the possibility of transporting an extra to assist a faerie that may be lacking. I was only successful in facilitating her return by travelling as a banshee, abandoning my beauty, and using my comb as a calling card for Fallon's final return."

The crowd responded with scattered nods of understanding, many colorful eyes darting towards Fallon, attempting to gauge her response.

"We have sorely missed our princess, who must now fulfill the role I will soon grow too old for. The position originally belonged to Finn, but his betrayal has stripped him of his right to the throne."

Finn was livid now, his hands balled in fists at his sides. For the first time since their reunion, he looked at Fallon, his face etched with incomparable frustration. "I thought I had gotten rid of you," he spat angrily, "You weren't supposed to be able to return. That day on the train, I found you still completely ignorant of who you really were. I didn't know how you *still* didn't comprehend you were different. Had I known of our mother's plan to travel as a banshee and provide you with that comb, I would have made sure to locate it before you could." He cast an angry glare towards Sheridan again.

Fallon's face betrayed her as she fumbled to find her words. Before she could reply, Sheridan interrupted again, "ENOUGH, Finn!" The faerie queen cried with so much force the mirrored walls trembled.

Turning towards his mother with nothing left to say, Finn stormed out of the hall, down the same path his sister had just travelled. Sheridan turned towards Fallon as he did so. Her mother took her hand, leading her to a standing position by her side, "There is someone else you should meet," her mother said in a quieter tone. Terrified at who else she would have to encounter, Fallon blinked her eyes, preparing herself for whatever was coming her way.

Through the doors walked a young man, but it was yet another face Fallon recognized. “*Riley?*” Fallon could not believe what she was seeing. Standing before her, wings sprouting from his back, was the boy who had typified her life in Dublin. Her constant. Riley moved towards her, exuding a sense of confidence she had never noticed in the human world.

“You didn’t think I’d let you get away that easily did you?” Riley called from approximately halfway down the path. He quickened his footsteps and reached Fallon, who remained frozen in shock beside her mother. He extended his arms, inviting Fallon into an embrace. Not knowing what else to do except reciprocate, Fallon reached her own arms to meet his. Upon touching his hands, the strongest spark yet blazed beneath Fallon’s skin. Her heart rate quickened and something inside of her felt as if it literally clicked. *He’s different here. Stronger, more secure.*

“Fallon,” Sheridan murmured, “I’d like to formally introduce you to Riley. You and he have been betrothed since the moment of your birth. As soon as he heard the news of Finn’s treachery, he took it upon himself to travel to the human world, keeping an eye on you until you were able to return to us.” Riley beamed, looking into Fallon’s eyes so intently that she feared blinking would ruin the warmth coming from inside.

“I know I could be a bit overprotective in the human world. I’m sorry for that. But I knew of Finn’s mal-intent and just needed to ensure your safe return. You did a remarkable job of taking care of yourself though, your highness. I merely served as an onlooker.”

Embarrassed by his praise, Fallon lowered her head, subtly acknowledging his compliment. Just as she had lifted the young faerie’s chin before, Riley reached out, lifted her chin, and placed the most delicate kiss upon her lips. As he did, something else stirred inside of her. Something she hadn’t felt as a human. Fallon felt aware of her body, her senses were that

much keener and her mind that much more in control. The final piece fell into place, and Fallon felt an unmistakable sense of power course through her veins.

“I just have one more question for you, Fallon,” her mother looked at her intently, “have you accepted this world, Connacht, as your home? Are you willing to forego any travel between the world of the humans and accept your final role here?”

Fallon eyed her mother, Riley, and the crowd of magnificent winged-creatures that looked up at her anxiously. Her gaze narrowed and she flashed what finally felt like a genuine smile, “I accept.”

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