

The Keepers of Éire

By Jordan Bernal



Chapter 1:



One

Christian Riley clicked the safe closed and gave the tumbler a quick spin. He picked up the portrait showcasing the politico eejit, careful to re-hang it level. He stuffed what he came for in his rucksack. His head snapped up, his focus on the locked door leading to the hallway beyond as several sets of heavy-soled boots slapped on the marble-tiled floor, echoing louder until they halted outside.

Bloody fecking hell, he thought, Gardaí. Christian shoved his thick, black hair into a knit cap and risked a glance over his shoulder at the boom of a battering ram. He slipped his arms into the straps of his rucksack and rushed to lift the partially opened window. The scream of approaching sirens filled the room.

He snagged the length of rope he left anchored from the roof when he broke in not five minutes ago. Christian clamped his carabineer in place as another boom from metal slamming into wood sounded. The door behind him splintered and he leapt into the rain-soaked abyss.

Rain stung his eyes as he landed hard on the puddle-riddled pavement.

“Damn close call, that one,” Christian muttered, his gloved hands shook as he unhooked himself. He flung the rope, then ducked into the shadows and away from the crowd of Gardaí vehicles surrounding his latest job. He doubled back several times to make sure he hadn’t been followed.

Christian darted past the neighborhood patrol into the least rundown of the North Dublin tenements and dashed up a dim narrow staircase, avoiding the creaky fourth step. He entered his flat and locked the door behind him. A quick scan confirmed there was nothing out of place in the sparse living area. He crossed to the bedroom, reached in, and flipped on the wall switch. His gaze flicked to the paperback extending over the nightstand by the length of his thumbnail. He stepped over the threshold and found the single strand of his hair on the rumpled bedclothes. His breath eased and his fingers relaxed on his clenched knife. His luck was holding. No one had caught him—yet.

Christian tucked the weapon under his pillow and tossed his rucksack into the corner. He stripped out of his damp clothes and fell face down onto his oversized bed. The clock blinked three forty-five and he hoped exhaustion from the heist and the adrenaline drain would keep his recurring and disturbing dreams at bay. Sleep overtook him.

Cold tendrils of fear slid down Christian’s back and swept over his face, chilling him. He grabbed at the covers, his legs thrashing in the tangled sheets. His heart pounded and his breathing labored, as though he was once again that sixteen-year-old street urchin running from the orphanage through Dublin’s run-down shipping quays.

Christian knew in his sleep-shrouded mind it was ‘the dream.’ He wanted out before it could grab him, but nothing stopped it. The dream reached out its sinewy fingers, clutched him, and catapulted him over the precipice.

Watery sunlight broke the boundary between night and day. A steady rain highlighted the eeriness of the hour. He crept past a whitethorn tree pregnant with white and colored ribbons marking the remembrance of loved ones. Mocking him.

Ten meters ahead, a stone circle with another whitethorn on the northern side stood in silent memorial. The mists swirled and parted. A figure, dressed in a dark hooded coat and black Wellies, making the gender indistinguishable, emerged from beneath the tree and walked to the center of the upright stones.

He stole through the wet grass toward the lone silhouette. A twig snapped like gunfire ricocheting in a tin can. The figure spun toward him, the hood fell back with the sudden motion, revealing a petite woman. She sported blonde hair that frizzed with the rain, dark eyes, and a small mouth twisted into a snarl.

“What are you doing here?” Her cheeks flushed and her eyes narrowed. “Haven’t you done enough?”

His jaw slackened, his mouth fell open. No sound emerged.

The wind caught and shredded her next words. Hot bloody rage roared through his body, drummed in his ears, clouded his vision red. He forced an unsteady hand to pull a jewel-handled dagger from its sheath at his belt.

Get it over with quick, the thought thundered in his mind.

The woman glanced up as a shadowy dragon swooped down to land between them.

“Now,” his mind screamed, “before the creature transforms completely and kills you.”

Feet planted wide, he stood transfixed unable to wrench his gaze from the apparition. He gulped air into starved lungs like a firestorm consuming oxygen.

The dragon grew in density, a gray shadow changed to iridescent burgundy. It stood on scaly hind legs, thick as juvenile oak trunks. Spikes erupted from the top of its triangular head. A red, forked tongue flicked between gleaming razor teeth. Sapphire eyes whirled under lowered ridges. The bat-shaped wings extended from its back, hiding the woman. Its chest, devoid of diamond-hard scales, lay exposed.

He tightened his fingers around the jeweled handle of the dagger, flipped it until he pinched the tip of the blade between his thumb and forefinger, drew back his arm, and hurled it.

A strangled cry escaped the woman’s lips.

He braced to absorb the dragon magic he knew would be released. The dagger passed through the still shimmering body of the dragon, and embedded into the woman’s chest.

Wave after wave of power buffeted him. He staggered. Wild, fiery, it tore through him, drove him to his knees. He gasped and fought to lift his head.

The dragon vanished like fog caught by a ray of sunlight. The woman slumped to the ground in slow motion. Rain continued to fall, cooling his face. The magic dissipated.

He pulled his exhausted body to his feet, his head and shoulders slumped and made his way to the woman. He gathered her in his arms and carried her lifeless body toward the growing light of day.

Christian moaned and thrashed his head from side to side. He was aware the location in the dream had shifted, but still couldn’t break free.

The rain slowed to a drizzle as he leaned the woman against a spiral and circle engraved boulder the size of a small car. The boulder blocked the entrance to a rock structure surrounding an enormous round earthen mound.

Sunlight glinted off something between the hilt of the dagger and the woman's chest. He reached down. The air exploded with noise like thunder. Blinded by a burst of white light, he careened back as if lightning had struck his fingertips and burned him all the way down to his toes. More magic than anything he had ever felt raced through him. Much like the River Liffey divided the city of Dublin, his heart split in half. Joy at the power the magic provided him warred with his grief.

Christian awoke to afternoon sunlight dappling his pillow. Its warmth bathed his face. Yet, the chill of the dream remained. He rubbed his chest where his pendant lay hot against his galloping heart. Was the pendant somehow triggering the dreams? He untangled himself from the sheets, rolled to a sitting position, and pressed the heel of his hand between his eyes. His headache speared like the jewel-handled dagger.

He'd seen a woman and a dragon inside his head. Heard her and the killer—the words, the tone. More disturbing, he'd experienced it all from within the murderer—his anger, his grief, and his intentions.

Christian stumbled from the bed to the loo to hunt up some aspirin, gobbled four tablets, then splashed cold water on his face. He scrubbed away sleep and the dregs of the dream. This one had been different. In the six months since the start of the dreams, the other three murder victims had never spoken to him.

Was he responsible for the death of another human being? Christian wondered. His breath shuddered out between trembling lips and his hands shook. He clenched them into fists, pounding the countertop over and over and over. In the mirror, dark blue eyes glinted back at him. A night's beard growth couldn't hide the pallor of his face. He gritted his teeth and opened his fists. One bruised hand reached for his dragon-embossed silver pendant. He felt the words engraved on the back.

Gaelic, he thought, but what did they mean? *Dilseacht, Fáil, Saoirse.*

He clutched it and wondered if his life was at stake—perhaps his honor as well—and his very soul.

Devan Fraser pressed her forehead against the pressurized airplane window. She gazed as the white-capped ocean crashed into the cliffs of Ireland's rugged coastline. She wondered for the hundredth time if she was doing the right thing. Had she really just packed up her life and traveled six thousand miles from her home in San Francisco on a whim? Or was she following the predestined path alluded to in her great-grandparents' letter?

The green fields past her window spread out like a chessboard, each square bordered by stone walls. Devan glanced down at the letter in her trembling hands. She closed her eyes and battled back the threatening tears. Chanel No. 5, her deceased mother's scent, wafted out from the paper. Devan let the memory of the day she found the letter, and much more, assault her.

Devan meandered her parents' long-shuttered master suite, her hand lingering over her father's monogrammed cufflinks. She cradled her mother's porcelain figurine of Dagda—the mythical Irish god. With their funerals over, Devan started the emotional task of sorting through her parents' things. She had returned from bereavement leave to discover her position at the university eliminated by the latest round of budget cuts. Her life had stopped, shattered into shards that continued to slash her into pieces.

Her parents had died in New York, celebrating their anniversary. Theirs was the only love she could ever count on. Her relationship with Rick had ended in disaster. She shuddered, dislodging the unwelcome images that crowded her mind. No, Rick's manipulation and possessiveness was not love. Better to concentrate on her family's love.

The mahogany bureau door hung ajar and Devan sighed as she opened it. Framed photos of both sets of grandparents, her parents, and her Uncle Gabriel in his Army uniform lined the shelves like gravestones.

The top shelf held a porcelain collection of castles, fairies, and other magical figures her father had given her mother. One for each anniversary. Devan wondered if there would be a new one in the suitcases she knew waited in her father's study.

Devan placed Dagda on the shelf. Her hand skimmed other Irish mythical heroes. Tucked at the back of the shelf, her hand whispered over a warm wooden box. She brought it down. Her fingers traced the carved dragon on the lid.

"Why, when Mom knew of my fascination with dragons and my Irish heritage, had she never shown me this before she died?" Inside the red velvet-lined box lay a silver ring with the same dragon engraved on it. She took the ring to her mother's side of the bed, set the box down, and turned on the lamp. Peering at the ring under the light, she noticed the foreign words engraved inside.

"Dilseacht, Fáil, Saoirse," she stumbled over the pronunciation. "What does that mean?"

She turned the ring over and over in her hand. "I've never seen Mom wear this." She picked up the box. "I've never even seen this before."

Something white peaked through a corner of the box, from under the lining. Carefully, Devan peeled the lining and lifted it out. It was a letter. She closed her hand around the ring. Perhaps, it was a birthday present for her. It was perfect: the ring and its box matched her collection. Suddenly, she felt like a six-year-old who had stumbled into a secret cache of Santa presents. Her hands shook as she unfolded the letter and read. It was addressed to her grandmother, Brinna. Brinna's mum and da hinted of a destiny and family to be found in Ireland.

Devan opened her hand and again looked at the ring. Her legs trembled and she was glad she was sitting so she couldn't fall. Not a present from her parents, not directly. But as she pushed the ring onto her right middle finger, she knew it was hers. She could almost hear the echoes of the foreign words as her finger tingled under the ring. She was the only living offspring of Patrick and Brinna Gallagher, therefore heir to the ring, and possibly to a new destiny.

Refolding the letter, Devan returned it to the box. Her gaze returned to the bureau, alighting on the pictures of her Irish grandparents. She knew Patrick and Brinna Gallagher were born, schooled, and married in Ireland. They immigrated to New York in the late 1940s when they were both in their early twenties and looking for work. Devan's mother, Meghann, was born in 1955, six years after her brother. Uncle Gabriel had been the one to die for his country in the Vietnam War, before he could marry and start his own family.

Devan took the photos from the bureau, along with the mahogany box, the Dagda figurine, and her father's handkerchief and cufflinks. In her room, she upended her gray backpack, emptied it of old notebooks and papers left over from her now defunct job. She wrapped the photos in a T-shirt and placed them carefully in the backpack along with the box, which held the letter, her father's cufflinks, and his handkerchief protecting the figurine.

Turbulence jostled her and the memory ended. Devan opened her eyes, returning her gaze to the Irish landscape speeding past. She was on the first leg of a journey to discover her hopes, her dreams, her destiny. The tears came and she couldn't stop them. Her lips trembled, and she bit down on her lower one to hold back her cry. She gulped down unsteady breaths. For the first time in her life, she was alone. No family, no one to love, no one to love her.

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