

LIZ DE JAGER

Banished

The Blackhart Legacy: Book One

TOR

Chapter One

Blackhart Family: Rumoured to be the descendants of the original Hansel and Gretel made famous by the Brothers Grimm in their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* collection from 1812, the family has been in residence in the United Kingdom since the late sixteenth century. It is unclear if the rumours about their heritage are based on fact; no evidence to prove or disprove the rumour has been found.

More information about the existing family members can be found in Archive Boxes:
Blackhart/1875–present.

From an archived report filed in HMDSDI HQ, 1978

Sitting on one of the swings in the park opposite the school, my watch tells me I'm forty minutes early for the start of my schoolday and I wonder how much longer this assignment will last.

A sixth-form girl walks up to the gates and leaves a single cream rose on the pavement, placing it carefully next to an open photo album. The rose is only one of many offerings

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that's been left since the news broke last night. Teddy bears, photos, candles, flowers. A silent outpouring of grief.

A friend helps the girl stand and they walk through the gates. I watch them move away, leaning into each other, every line of their linked bodies speaking of the shock and horror at another friend and schoolmate taking her own life.

I sigh wearily and let my hair drop forward. It tickles my cheeks but I don't shake it back. I've not worn my hair long for – I try to think – maybe a year and half now. Back then I was a different girl, untouched by the really bad things in life. Unaware that crazy things existed. I shudder to think how fearless I was, the risks I took, going out with my friends, staying out late, dancing till dawn at clubs, kissing boys. How I planned my future in long mad emails to my best friend Karina, who lives in Germany, speculating about when we would get to see one another again and how we'd be spending our gap year travelling around Europe and Asia. But that was then, and this is now and that girl from long ago is unrecognizable in now-me.

I puff out my breath and focus on the cars pulling up in front of the school, kids saying goodbye to their parents, life going on. Today I'm all about being prey and luring David Gardner to notice me and talk to me for longer than five minutes, away from his mates and hangers-on. I've spent two weeks researching, and my plans are simple but well laid. I know he cuts through the park on his way to school in the mornings. I know he likes his girls pretty and shy and a bit dreamy – so I'm giving him a shy, arty girl secretly crying out to be noticed.

I dig a tissue out of my pocket and wipe my nose and

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dab at my eyes, suppressing an inward groan at the acting. I'm not a dishonest person and I'm not good at lying, but if it helps with the overall story the mark sees, then that's what I'll do.

I kick off with one foot, letting the swing move beneath me and I lean far back and stare up at the blue sky, watching the clouds coast by. I like the feeling of being suspended and I float there quietly for a few minutes, just being. There is a soft noise by my side and the swing next to mine creaks a bit as a weight settles into it.

I sit up with a jerk and stare at the boy sitting next to me. My surprise isn't feigned. I didn't hear him walk up. I didn't see him either. I know it should bother me as my hearing is good and my sight is excellent but my thoughts are clearly drifting a bit too much. I focus on staying completely in the role here, so I dash my sleeve across my eyes and give him a tremulous smile.

'Hey,' he says, smiling a wide friendly smile. 'Are you okay?'

I begin to nod but then shake my head. 'Not so much. I'll be fine, though.' I look over to the school gates. 'It's going to be a tough day.'

'Did you know Chloe?' he asks, his eyes shifting from me to the front of the school, where more people are leaving flowers and small items, mostly little teddy bears holding hearts. 'I'm David Gardner, by the way. My friends call me Dave.'

You would never think it, but it's actually really hard to lie about your own name. I swallow against the constriction in my throat and hold out my hand. 'Kelley,' I say, shaking

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his hand, blushing wildly. His hand lingers for a moment longer than necessary in mine before he curls his fingers around the chain that suspends the swing. The look he gives me is slow and hot. Score one to me. ‘I’m new,’ I say, brushing my hair back before continuing. ‘But I had art class with Chloe for about a week before – you know.’ I let my eyes drift to the scene in front of the school, before looking back at him. ‘We spoke a few times. She seemed a bit quiet, but friendly. I liked her art.’

I’ve watched Dave for two weeks now. I know he’s popular and charismatic. He has a wide circle of friends he hangs out with. His grades remain good regardless of how much partying he does and he’s currently not in any relationship, although there is a group of around six girls who would dearly love to change that. Nothing about him is too remarkable. He’s just handsome enough to draw the attention of all the girls and just clever enough to get decent grades. He is ordinary in every way, or so it would seem, but I know better.

‘I knew Chloe,’ he says, staring at me. ‘She was a nice girl. Always friendly, up for a laugh. I really liked her. Full of energy and she liked to try out mad things. Like, this one time we hung out, she decided she was going to do a Banksy on some of the walls in town.’ He laughs at the memory. ‘Good times.’

I recall the photos I’d seen of Chloe before I started school here and I remember what she looked like before she fell in with Dave Gardner. They offered up two very different images of the same girl. The Chloe I knew was thin, pale, miserable, a bad photocopy of the real vibrant

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girl her parents tried to hold on to. After they had spoken with the school's principal for help, the job got handed to me as my first solo mission.

I draw a breath and smile at Dave. 'It's so sad, you know. I wonder what made her . . . ?' I shake my head and my hair irritates my cheeks. I brush it back. 'Her parents must be devastated.'

We exchange sad expressions, but I know he's looking at me, watching my every move. His hot eyes rake my hair, my face, my hands, my legs. Finally he notices my school bag and portfolio. 'You draw?' he asks, nodding his head to the portfolio resting on the grass.

My hand flutters to my face and I nod nervously. 'But I'm not really any good. Not like Chloe.' Which is another blatant lie, but he can't know that.

'Can I see?'

I reach down and hand the portfolio to him. I stare at my hands, not wanting to see his reaction to the art in my portfolio.

'These are really cool,' he says after a few minutes of quiet where the only sound was him paging through the sketchbook. His voice has taken on this weird timbre, making the hair on my arms stand up. 'Are you studying art when you go to uni?'

I flush prettily, shake my head and smile. 'No. I'll have to do something sensible, like become a doctor or something. My parents'll never let me do an art degree.'

He taps one of the sketches and I look over. It is one of my favourites. It's of a girl sitting up in bed, staring at her window. It's night-time so the sketch is full of dark shadows

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but a moon is shining through the glass and you can just see the hint of a monstrous shape outside the window. The girl's expression is one of curiosity.

Dave looks at me and there is a hunger in his eyes. 'This is incredible. You're crazy good.'

I smile lightly and take the portfolio from him. 'You are being sweet, thanks.' I hold it in front of myself, like a shield. 'I have to get going. Start the day for real.'

He stands up and walks with me as far as the gate to the park. 'Kelley. Some of us meet after school as part of the drama group. There's a place we use, behind the assembly hall. If I give you directions, do you want to come and hang out with me?'

'Today?' I did not expect this so soon and I bite back the triumphant grin I feel hovering around my mouth.

'Yeah, why not? Of course, you don't have to. But it would be nice.' His smile is full of boyish charm and sweet eagerness, as if my 'yes' answer would mean the world to him. I hold on to that image hard as he leans closer and I try not to gag as the smell of his breath hits me. It smells like rotting vegetation and stagnant water. 'Say you'll come?'

For a brief second I feel a compulsion to punch him in the head, but I get a grip on myself and smile a smile that says I'm flattered that he'd even think I'm cool enough to hang out with him.

'Okay, it sounds like fun. I'll see you after school.' My smile probably looks dazzled and I keep it there as Dave digs out a notebook from his bag and draws a rough outline of the assembly hall and shows me where the green room is. Of course I know where it is. I've prowled the school at

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all hours and know every single nook and hiding place. I take the piece of paper and fold it into my bag, keeping my smile a bit stunned.

We walk to the school gates, where he spots some of his mates and lifts a hand to them. He turns back to me as we near them. ‘You possibly made my day. I’ll see you later.’

I nod and turn away before the group of girls standing by the gates can see the look of triumph on my face. They immediately form a huddle and start whispering, slanting sly looks at me.

I touch the knife resting against my hip in its custom-made sheath and take courage from it. The trap has been laid, now all I have to do is spring it.

Chapter Two

Banshee: Commonly found in Celtic countries, the female banshee or bean sí is an omen of death and a messenger from the World of the Dead. She portends death by wailing when someone is about to die. Contrarily, male banshees are far rarer than female banshees and are dangerous to humans. They are captured by human beauty and artistic ability and, once obsessed with a human, they will stalk the human, devouring their essence through psychic draining. In most cases, the human will die or commit suicide in an attempt to get away from the banshee.

From *The Blackhart Bestiarum*

‘Kelley?’

I jerk with fright when Dave’s voice echoes through the room. It’s just after four and I’ve been here for a long time, waiting for him to show up. I know it looks as if I’ve been sleeping because my hair is mussed and I look out of it, so I yawn widely and grin at him in an embarrassed way.

‘Hey,’ I say. ‘I must have fallen asleep.’

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‘You look cute,’ he says.

I know what he sees, a girl with raggedly cut chin-length dark curls that refuse to stay out of her eyes, a slightly upturned nose and a smattering of freckles that no concealer can hide. Green eyes, a wide mouth. All of it forms a pretty enough picture aimed at attracting his attention and keeping it. I’m the pretty girl next door whom boys are best friends with and never fall in love with. His smile is big and open and friendly and it belies the hunger in his eyes. I see it only for a moment, peering out at me, before he’s Dave again: just a normal boy meeting a pretty girl after school.

‘All soft and dreamy.’

‘Ha, wait till you see me bust some awesome ninja moves,’ I quip in an effort to hide my growing nervousness.

He walks further into the room, glancing around. Everything is exactly the way it’s always been. The couch, the jumble of random bits of furniture and odd bits of theatre props. His eye falls on my sketchpad, lying open next to me. It shows a half-finished portrait of his face, a close-up full of shadows, his eyes dark and enigmatic.

He hesitates for a few seconds only, but it’s long enough for me to see that the portrait has really pleased him. His smile, when he turns to me, is slow and languorous and I can tell he thinks he’s already won me over.

‘I can’t wait to see your moves.’ He sits down on the couch and I shift my legs so he can sit close to me. ‘You really are very pretty, did you know that?’

His hand reaches out to tuck a curl of hair behind my ear. The look I give him is all big eyes and a shy, flattered smile.

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I focus on the small wooden pendant hanging around my neck, beneath my clothes, taking comfort from feeling its weight against my skin. It feels a little warmer than usual and I touch it through my school shirt, only briefly, before I drop my hand. I call my magic up and let the tiniest sliver surface, just a little bit, below my skin. It enhances the way I look, the way I shine, making me more appealing, softening my hard edges, making him believe the glamour I'm projecting of the shy, awkward, flattered girl. I will him to see me as the type of girl he wants to see and I hate myself for it, just a bit, but then I know what he is and what he's done and I don't feel sorry any more.

'Thanks,' I say. 'You're not half bad yourself.'

He laughs softly. 'I'm glad you decided to come and meet me. I think we have a lot in common.'

'Oh, really?' I try not to move my head away from his hand. He's stroking my cheek and neck as if I'm a cat. I really hate being touched by strangers. 'And what is that?'

'Well, I like you. I'm pretty sure you like me. You're talented and pretty. I'm . . . well, me.' His smile is cheeky, self-deprecating. 'I'm glad we spoke today. I'm glad you're here. I'd like to get to know you better.' His eyes are bottomless pits and his voice has thickened, his tongue slurring against his teeth. His head is close to mine now and I hold my breath, waiting, suspecting, hoping for what's coming next. 'Also, you shine so brightly.'

Which is exactly the kind of thing I hoped he'd say.

The telescopic iron baton slides out from under my sleeve and into my palm and with a satisfying snick I whip it at his face, hard. It connects with his cheek, making a meaty

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thwap sound. I'm off the couch and away from him in the space of a heartbeat but he's even faster.

He runs at me and shoulders me in the stomach, driving me into the small table where countless aspiring Arlington student actors and actresses have put on their make-up. We land on the floor but I'm already moving, doing my best to ignore the pain in my back and ribs. His hands reach for my throat and I punch him in the side of the head. He jerks back with surprise, and I follow it up with another swipe of my baton across the face. As he grabs for his face, I buck him off and scrabble backwards. I suck in a breath when the movement sends flares of pain throughout my body. I'm hurt but there is no blood and I can still breathe without sobbing, so it isn't serious.

'You know,' he says, not bothering to hide his surprise or annoyance. 'You played me.'

I shrug and smile, swinging the iron rod in front of me like a slender cricket bat. 'You fell for it,' I say, not bothering to hide the smugness in my voice. 'You could have chosen anyone else, but you chose me. Pretty stupid of you.'

He snarls at me and I grimace at the smell of his rancid breath in the confined space.

'You know what else is stupid?' I say, backing away from him, luring him further into the small room. 'Hunting in the same school for over a year. You must have been desperate. Desperate and stupid. Your clan must be so relieved I'm sending you back. Your antics in the Frontier have been a true embarrassment to them.'

It's this final insult that makes David Gardner transform into a monster. In the space of a heartbeat I've come to

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share the room with a creature no human should face. Gone is the teenager with the bright future. In his place is a monster from an ugly nightmare. Raw-boned and big, he easily tops seven feet. Sickly grey skin ripples across his narrow, hunched shoulders and his long sinewy neck flexes as he swings his head to try and keep track of me. His face has a wide flat nose and curving thin mouth. His eyes, still impossibly human, blink at me before the pupil dilates and narrows into a vertical stripe. The silver claws at the ends of his muscled arms are a good three inches long – being cut by them would mean a course of antibiotics and a few days in the infirmary at the Manor.

The thing about banshees is that there are very few of them and they work hard to keep the equilibrium within their small matrilineal clans. There are even fewer male banshees, and once a male's appetite for human girls quickens there is no way that female banshees will stand being around him, even if it means losing a mate. It is about politics too, and the banshee clans would rather lose one of their strong male partners than face the displeasure of the Unseelie ruler, the Queen of Air and Darkness, Suola.

The banshee in front of me has no reason to be here and no permission from his clan mother or the Unseelie Queen. He is a rogue and knows that I am here to send him back.

I keep my iron baton in my hand and focus on the creature. Long thin teeth slide from engorged gums and, as he lunges for me, I run past him, somersault over the couch and come up behind it. There's an audible *whump* on the

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other side of the couch as he runs fully into the magic circle it had taken me most of the day to set up.

I peer over the back of the couch and see him standing in the middle of a gently glowing circle, holding his head, making confused clicking noises in the back of his throat. The air is filled with the sickening smell of singed skin and I swallow against the bile rising in my throat.

I cast an eye at the wooden floor covered by the threadbare carpet he's standing on, noticing with relief how strongly the sigils I had so painstakingly crafted with phoenix-blood ink shimmer all around him. Because I didn't know how strong he would be, I had layered two magic circles, one within the other, hoping that if he got through the first one the second one would stop him. It was extra work and time consuming, but because this is my first solo gig I do not want to screw up.

I stand up on shaky legs and walk around the couch to stand in front of him.

'By the authority of the High King of Alba and by the trust placed in the Blackhart family, you are sentenced to return to the Unseelie Court, where you will face punishment in accordance to the treaties signed by the Queen of Air and Darkness. You are guilty of unlawfully accessing a gateway, of killing a human boy and impersonating him for the duration of your unauthorized visit to the human realm and by direct interference, causing the death of three young women. You will have no chance to plead your innocence as the Court found you guilty in your absence. Your sentence will be carried out when you arrive at the Unseelie Court.'

I'm relieved that my voice quivers only slightly as I speak.

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I keep my eyes on the creature in the magical circle at all times. He's raging, testing the strength of the walls by hammering on them. Each time he does, bright sparks of energy singe his hands and forearms.

'I see you now, girl.' His voice thrums low in his throat. 'There is so much darkness around you.' He pauses, waiting for me to say something else, but I bite my lip and give him my best Clint Eastwood glare. 'I can taste your future, Blackhart. It's filled with pain and anguish. The Dark Gods hunger and no one else will be there to help you. Do you think you can survive what's coming, all by yourself?'

I am standing in front of him now. And once more he looks like Dave Gardner but there is nothing in his eyes that looks even remotely human. I know he's playing mind-games but I can't shake the feeling that there's a grain of truth in what he's saying. Banshees are weird at the best of times and the males are especially touched, more likely to go off the rails in puberty because of their hormones, which is why so few of them outlast any of the females in their clans.

Their gift of foretelling usually manifests during times of great distress. And right now would definitely count as him being in distress. He knows I'm ready to send him back to Suola's Court, right into the waiting jaws of her Beast. I've heard stories about her famous executioner and the delight he takes in torturing all those who oppose the Dark Queen, and it's given me nightmares for a week, so, in a way, I don't blame him for trying to rattle me.

'Feel free to tell your queen all you see, monster. I'm interested to hear what she has to say about this mess you've left behind for us to clean up.'

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‘Best to watch your back, Blackhart. Most of Alba would like to see you and your family burn.’

I’m unimpressed by his threat. ‘I’ve heard that before, monster. We all have. And as much as the Fae dislike us, we do what’s necessary to prevent monsters like you killing humans.’

He gives a low rasping laugh and licks his lips with a disturbingly pink tongue. ‘Never go to the Otherwhere by yourself, Blackhart. I’ll find you. I’ll tell my friends about you. Maybe we’ll even come back here and find you. Imagine the fun we’d have.’

‘Tell your friends “hi” from me when you see them. Before you die, that is. Or maybe you won’t even see them. I hear that Suola’s kept her Beast on a short leash lately and he’s hungry.’

I’m lying through my teeth but he can’t know that. A distressed whine rises from him and I cover my nose with my shirt as the room is suddenly drenched in the smell of fear and something else unpleasant I try not to identify.

I hold up the small carved wooden token that’s been hanging around my neck for the past two weeks. It takes a few moments for him to stop pacing so he can focus on what I’m holding. When he does, he stands up straight and a look of alarm crosses his reptilian features.

‘No,’ he says. ‘Don’t . . .’

‘Shut up.’ I let the token dangle off its chain and I watch his eyes follow it as it swings. ‘You didn’t give Chloe or Sandra or Jo a chance. I don’t see why I should give you the option of travelling back to the Otherwhere on an easy ride.’

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I walk towards the door. Just as I reach it I turn around and snap the little piece of wood neatly in half between my fingers. The sound it makes is a subsonic boom that shakes your bones and makes you feel a bit funny in the head.

I watch as the walls I had created so painstakingly with my own magic flash downwards, not unlike a laser scanning a document. The lower it gets, the faster it flashes, taking the banshee – aka a boy called Dave – with it, basically slicing him to bits before my eyes. I stand there and watch it happen. I don't really want to, but I make myself. I owe it to lovely Chloe, who fell in love with the wrong guy and who paid for it with her life.

When the beam reaches the floor where the sigils are inscribed, it runs along the ground widdershins, in reverse, taking the ink with it. Within seconds there is nothing left in the room that shouldn't be there. Unless you count the stench of singed skin, fear and urine, none of which I can do anything about.

I close the door behind me with shaking hands and turn the lock, pocketing the key. Time to go and report to Principal Williams that Arlington Secondary School will now no longer be plagued by supernaturally motivated suicides.

Chapter Three

The graveyard at dusk is still. I jump over the fence a few metres away from the locked iron gate and make my way along the tumbled stones and ancient yew trees standing guard among the graves. I ignore the long shadows snaking their way across the ground as night falls. I've been here so often that I could find my nan's grave while wearing a blindfold.

The gravestone isn't ostentatious. Above Nan's birth date and the date that she died, the simple lines read:

MIRABELLE BLACKHART

GRANDMOTHER, SISTER, AUNT, FRIEND.

'EVERYTHING YOU CAN IMAGINE IS REAL.'

I sit down next to the gravestone and lay the bright spray of yellow flowers on the ground. Someone's been keeping a good eye on her grave and it looks neater and tidier than some of the others.

I hug my knees to my chest and only find my voice after a few minutes.

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‘First solo job, Nan. It went okay, I think. I sent the banshee back and I was tempted just to burn him and the whole building to the ground, but that would have been messy and I think Uncle Jamie would have been really annoyed with me.’

I clear my throat and touch the petals of the flowers. ‘I brought you some sunny flowers. I thought they’d cheer you up a bit.’

The silence in the graveyard acts as a balm to my frayed nerves and I watch as something, a beetle of some sort, pushes its way along the grass on the far side of the grave.

‘Please tell me you’re not planning to turn into a creepy Goth and hang out in graveyards.’

I try not to show my fright and twist towards my uncle Jamie’s voice. How a six-foot-three guy weighing two hundred and fifty pounds can move as quietly as he does is a skill he’s yet to share. The knife in my hand is a reassuring presence and I don’t slide it back into its sheath in the small of my back when he sits down on the ground opposite to me.

He leaves a single white rose on the ground next to my yellow flowers.

‘What are you doing here?’ I ask him. His features are difficult to make out in the darkness but his silhouette is something I’ll recognize anywhere.

‘Catching up with you before I head to Hawaii. I’m training some US government people down there.’

‘Nice. Do I get to come along?’

His chuckle is low and charming. ‘Oho, a good try, but

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no. You get to go home and sleep and eat. You look like you're made from candyfloss, like you'll drift away on the breeze any second.' He waves his hand in the air to show me exactly how wafty I look.

I scowl at him in the dim light. 'I'm fine.'

'You used a lot of magic. You need to rest. Do the paperwork to close the case and just relax. You'll be off on more adventures pretty soon.'

'I'm ready now,' I say.

'What are you doing here?' he asks me, blatantly ignoring my comment.

'Just wondering about stuff,' I say. 'How different my life would have been had she lived and the house not been burned to the ground.'

He sits quietly next to me for a bit before he drags out his dented pack of cigarettes and fiddles with it between his fingers.

'Did you ever wonder why Mirabelle made you do boxing?' he asks me. 'Or why she insisted you learn karate?'

I look at him in confusion. 'She never made me do anything,' I reply. 'I chose to do those things.'

'Do you remember her prompting you?'

I hate to admit it, but I remember her showing me the karate pamphlets. It took a few weeks but I eventually told her I'd be interested in taking classes. The boxing happened later, when we moved to the village and the local gym advertised classes after school. I liked the idea of learning how to defend myself, especially as the karate instructor I had in Germany had me compete in my age group and I enjoyed the competition.

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‘What are you saying, Jamie?’

‘Mirabelle’s been training you how to look after yourself all your life, Kit. You may not have realized that, but she knew a time would come when you would be drawn back into the family. And she wanted to make sure you wouldn’t be at a disadvantage.’

I want to argue with him, but I can’t because I suspect he’s telling the truth.

‘Why did she run from the family? If she knew about my gift, about the magic, she should have stayed.’

‘Mirabelle wanted to give you a chance to grow up as yourself. She knew that your life as a Blackhart would mean one of constant training and learning about the Otherwhere. She saw your parents’ death as a chance to give you the opportunity to have the normal childhood that none of us had. Then, when you were older, she would tell you about the family and you could make the decision to join us or walk away. We thought we’d tell you on your eighteenth birthday. But things changed when she was threatened; when she called me.’

I grunt. ‘Too late.’

He sighs and shifts uncomfortably.

‘Are you going to sit here the whole night, feeling sorry for yourself?’ Jamie’s voice isn’t as harsh as it could be. ‘I’m heading to the airport and if I don’t leave soon I’ll miss my flight.’

‘I’m done,’ I say and stand up smoothly, keeping the knife by my side. It was night-time in a graveyard. You just never know what might lurk in the dark.

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‘I’ll walk you to your car,’ he says to me and drops an arm around my shoulders, giving me a quick squeeze. ‘I’m proud of you. You did really well sorting out the mess at that school.’

I beam a smile at that but pretend to watch my feet, not wanting him to see how much his compliment mattered to me.

‘And I’m being serious, Kit. Go back to the Manor, do your paperwork and just relax. Mrs Evans is away at her niece’s wedding so you’ll have the whole place to yourself. Brownie weddings go on for at least a week, if not more if all the clan turns up.’

‘But I’m fine,’ I tell him. ‘A bit sore and bruised, but I’m okay.’ I hold my hand out and my magic shimmers around my skin. ‘See? If I was as tired as you’re making out, I wouldn’t be able to do that. And are you sure I can’t come with you? I’ll be no bother, I promise.’

Jamie lets out a long-suffering sigh. ‘I pity the man you decide to marry one day,’ he tells me as he vaults over the fence. He waits for me to do the same. ‘You just don’t know how to listen.’

I shrug, used to this. ‘It’s okay, we’ll be having so much sexy times there won’t be any listening.’

‘Oh, that is uncalled for,’ Jamie laughs, pushing me away. ‘You teenagers are just gross.’

I laugh as he climbs into his jeep.

‘I’m proud of you, Sparky. You’ve done well on this mission. Now, go home.’ He kisses my forehead before shutting the door.

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I lift my hand in farewell as he spins the wheel and drives away into the night. I walk back to my own rental car, a small Fiat, and climb in. I'm soon back on the main motorway heading for the Manor and at least a week of solitude.

Chapter Four

Blackhart Manor: Blackhart Manor is built on an important confluence of leylines* (commonly known as a nexus or node) within the Devon countryside. Unsubstantiated reports claim that a gateway to the Otherwhere is located within the forest that borders the property.

**Leylines:* lines of earth energy, similar to a highway, that criss-cross the earth, making it possible for those who have the ability to tap into it, to renew body, mind and spirit.

From an archived report filed in HMDSDI HQ, 1984

It's weird waking up in the Manor to find myself alone. I came in during the small hours of the morning, expecting at least one or two of my cousins to be around, but the rambling old house is empty. I walk through the house, my footsteps echoing down the long passageways, through majestic rooms with high ceilings, wood panelling and chandeliers and furniture that would give apoplexy to all the hosts of the *Antiques Roadshow*.

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I make my way to the kitchen with some reluctance. The place is sparkling and nothing is out of place. I'm about to rummage in the cupboards when I spot a note addressed to me stuck to the industrial-sized fridge, in a neat printed hand:

Breakfast is ready in the conservatory. Jeremy and I will be back first thing on Sunday after Gwendolyn's handfasting. Dinner is in the fridge.

And it is signed by our house brownie with a rather elaborate and dramatic E.

I make myself a cup of tea and carry it through to the conservatory. It's a Victorian affair with lots of plants and a big glass table in the centre; it makes me feel as if I'm having breakfast in the jungle.

Mrs Evans is as good as her word. The elaborate breakfasts she plans when all the cousins and uncles and aunties are in town has been scaled down enough to feed a mere five of me. She's not subtle and clearly thinks I need fattening up. I agree with her. It's easier than arguing with the Blackhart brownie who runs the domestic life of the Manor with an iron fist sheathed in a Laura Ashley oven glove.

I dish myself bacon, eggs, toast, grilled tomatoes and a glass of ice-cold orange juice. This I carry to the table and fall to with gusto. It tastes as if it's just been made and I don't know how brownie magic works, only that it does, and I love Mrs Evans with all my heart.

Using my magic tires me out; it makes me hungry and I can sleep for a week after completing a tough ritual. But

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I know that, if I push myself, I can go on for longer, and will just need extra sleep and to nurse a bad head for a few days. Judging by Jamie's mothering comments at the graveyard early last night, I must have looked really bad. I didn't actually feel it then, and the only real hint of how exhausted I was came later last night as I slept like the dead until hunger woke me. Although I feel more human now, all I can think about is food and feeding this ravening maw that's opened inside me. Yet another reason not to date: I can out-eat most competitive eaters any time of the day without blinking.

I have a second course (warm fresh pastries) and coffee before I get up and wander back through the empty house to the library, where I sit down with a sigh and start on the paperwork the closure of the case necessitates. There are seven forms to fill in. In triplicate. The wording has to be in Latin and, in some rare instances, Greek.

Up until a year ago I was a normal sixteen-year-old girl, doing average everyday things, going to a normal school, enjoying art and dreaming about becoming a prop designer in Hollywood. I didn't have to know Latin or Greek or Arabic. Yet now, here I am, a Blackhart claimed and trained, and I'm expected to be able to know stuff no sane person in modern times should know. Aunt Letitia (She Who Must Be Obeyed, according to, well, all my cousins) has, however, given me some leeway as I was brought up as a norm. So instead of expecting the forms turned around within twenty-four hours of completing a case, I have forty-eight. Thanks, Aunt Letty, you're my hero.

I've done the first set of papers by lunchtime and decide to check my emails and go for a swim. It is a gloriously

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sunny day and I stretch out on a lounger next to the outside pool for a few minutes, letting the sun warm me, shaking off the chill from the dark library.

I swim a few laps and clamber back out again, feeling better for the exercise and getting rid of some of the stiffness from yesterday's fight. I choose not to notice the bruises along my side: a side-effect from my brush with the violent banshee. I move a bit slower than I'd like, but a few days of rest and I should be up to running the obstacle course Jamie's set up behind the house.

The sense of isolation is distracting. It doesn't bother me, not really, but I'm a bit put out by my cousins not even bothering to ring or text me to congratulate me on the successful completion of my first solo mission. It's maybe not a big thing for them, but for me it feels as if I've graduated, as if I've got my wings. And where are they? I check my phone. No text messages, no notes, no phone calls. I sigh and mutter to myself. Woe is me.

I move my sword to the side, so it can rest next to my lounger, and I pull my laptop towards me. My emails are very few. There is one from Karina in Germany and she's sent photos of her new boyfriend – he's not as hot as she seems to think he is – and tells me they're planning to backpack around Greece for the summer holidays. She sends me a photo of her brother Udo, whom I've had a crush on since I was seven. He's looking at the camera in an angry way and his scowl makes him look badass. He's dark haired, like Karina, and has the same dark melty eyes as his sister. I kiss my laptop screen and send her an email back. I tell her about school, about a random boy I like, about how

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different things are now that Nan's gone. I keep it light and it's all lies and I feel so bad about it. Telling Karina about any of the real Blackhart stuff isn't something I can even consider. Apart from it being dangerous to her, she'd think I've gone nuts, believing in faeries and ogres. She's the most sober and logical person I know and would never understand about monsters lurking in the darkness trying to eat your face off.

As I press 'send' on my email filled with lies and deceit, my email pings again. It's from my cousin, Megan.

The subject line says: Find it, and it's yours.

And that's it. No further message.

I grin. It's a challenge and one Megan sets for us occasionally, sending us on various quests around the estate. The victor always comes away with either a new techy gadget she's designed or, as the younger lot call it: Meganized. Jamie got his flashy new Ducati Monster that way. My cousin Marc still sulks about that, saying that Jamie cheated and that the bike was meant for him, but Megan sets the rules: finders keepers, losers weepers.

I check and notice that I'm the only recipient. This challenge is for me only.

Okay. I'm up for a bit of questing.

I pull a pair of surf shorts and a T-shirt on over my bathing suit and start my hunt. An hour of wandering around the house finding little notes hidden in obvious and not-so-obvious places, and I'm directed to the basement garage.

A cherry-red Mini Cooper sits proudly in the middle of a strategically placed spotlight, keeping the rest of the garage in darkness. An envelope's trapped beneath the windscreen

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wiper with my full name written on it. Katherine Gabrielle Blackhart. It's in Megan's handwriting.

It holds two pieces of paper. The first is a note that simply reads:

*Congratulations on your success! We are very proud of you.
Welcome to the madness. Now, just keep staying alive!
Lots of love,
Team Blackhart – sorry, Marc made me write that,
Megan xx*

The second note is the ownership papers of the Mini. It's in my name.

I lay my hand on the bonnet and grin. I can't believe it. I've seen Megan tinkering with the car for months now, restoring it, finding bits and pieces here and there and taking the already cool car and making it into a souped-up red monster that growls and purrs when the engine turns over.

And she's given it to me. It feels amazing.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I take it out, knowing immediately that it's Megan without even looking at the display.

'Kit Blackhart!' she's yelling, sounding a bit hysterical.
'You find your toy yet?'

'I just did! Oh my God, Meg, I love her.'

'Have you taken her out for a spin?'

'No, not yet. I literally just found the note and I'm walking around her and she's the most stunning thing I've ever seen.'

'Good, I'm glad you like her. Her name is Lolita.' I

become aware of the fact that the voice is no longer in my ear, but next to me. I turn and find myself staring at all three of my nearest cousins, the twins Megan and Marc and their younger brother, Kyle. The door to the armoury's swinging shut behind them on silent hinges and I realize that they have been lurking in there.

Marc's carrying a huge platter of cakes and Kyle looks embarrassed hanging on to a forest of colourful balloons that spell out: 'Congratulations!!'

'Did you seriously think we'd miss celebrating your first lone mission?' Megan asks me as she walks into me and wraps me in a huge hug, lifting me off the ground and swinging me around. No mean feat for a girl the same height and weight as me. 'I can't believe it took you so long to check your emails! We've been down here for like a million years.'

I can't stop laughing at her exaggeration. Marc, Megan's twin, holds open his arm and balances the tray of cakes to one side.

'You kicked ass yesterday. Well done. We're super proud of you.' He pushes a kiss on my forehead and hugs me. I rest there a moment, loving how I fit in with this little trio.

The youngest of the Blackharts at fifteen, Kyle is even taller than Marc and gangly. With his glasses and serious features he looks like a version of Harry Potter who just happens to know the best way to kill a Yaksha without breaking a sweat.

'She's not kidding,' Kyle says. 'We've been hiding down here since about twelve, waiting for you to stop working. You know Aunt Letitia doesn't really mind if you're late with the paperwork, right?'

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‘Wrong,’ Marc says, shoving a plate in my direction and a glass of something fizzy. ‘Letitia gets extremely pissed off if we’re late with reports. It’s you she coddles, as you’re the baby.’

Kyle scowls at his elder brother. ‘She doesn’t coddle.’

‘She does. She pinches your cheeks,’ Megan says with her mouth full of pastry.

‘That’s abuse,’ Kyle counters. ‘I’ve told her to stop.’

‘It will never stop, face it. Even when you’re forty, she’ll still pinch your cheeks.’

He frowns at me in disapproval. ‘Not you too, Kit, really?’

I grin. ‘I can do and say whatever I like. This is my party.’ And I push a handful of cake into his startled face.