

BOOK ONE OF THE CELTIC PROPHECY

FATE'S HAND

By

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Fate's Hand
Book One of The Celtic Prophecy
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*This book is dedicated to my parents, Thomas and Nancy Hughes,
who taught me that the only limits there are in this world are the
ones you give yourself.*

*When a thing is first conceived all things are possible;
but only when a choice is made, does fate take a hand.*

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Chapter 1

The Oracle, the most revered and feared of the Vates, cocked her head, her milky white eye rounding on the dying man. She dropped to a predatory crouch, the ragged shawl resettling around her shoulders like ruffled feathers, its ends trailing on the ground soaking up the spreading blood. She patted his hand, giving the man some solace, helping him to die, when *she* had set him on this path. Unaware that her succor flowed from a poisoned teat, the deluded bastard scrambled to get closer to her, but his arms and legs found no purchase on the ground slick with his blood.

Cormac MacBrehon felt his gore rising, but turned away too late, glimpsing her poke at the exposed intestines, lean closer, hooked nose almost touching—

“What the fuck is taking so long?”

Momentarily relieved that his morbid trance was broken, he glanced aside and read the impatience etched in the clenched fists and the cords that stuck out from the acolyte’s scrawny neck. Relief soured into rage. “Death, then rigor mortis.” He had to fight back an urge to snap the boy’s spine at his blank, puzzled countenance *still* after eighty years of lessons. “In time,” he instructed, more for himself than his student. “Several more hours, at least, because the weather is unseasonably warm.”

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“Fuck patience.” The novice rounded on him to stand just inches away from his face, “Master, we’ve waited long enough. The time to strike is now. The prophecies have decreed it.”

Insolent bastard; if only Cormac were free to act. “Hmm and how d’ye propose we do tha’? We doonae know where ta begin.”

“And you want to let this, this...” sweeping his hand in the direction of the old woman, “this thing dictate...”

Fury spilling over, adrenaline pumping, he seized his student’s neck; it would be easy to snap the fragile bones under his fingers. Pressure in just the right spot and...lift...blood pooling in the boy’s face...such a lovely shade of purple. He relished the dawning submission in the boy’s eyes and smiled, his temper leveling. So unsuspecting, so naïve the young are; part of their nature, to have this illusion of invulnerability that blinds them to danger. “Hold yer tongue, laddie. And for all ‘tis holy, keep yer voice doon.”

The boy scabbled at the ground trying to find a toehold—anything that would keep his weight on the ground as he clawed at the imprisoning hand.

Cormac squeezed again to educate—the student does not instruct the teacher.

Audible gasping gave way to breathless grunts and the fumbling fingers lost their urgency. Hands flailed, but the fingers caressed, and once he saw respect reflected in the dying eyes, he released his grip. The boy stumbled away choking, gasping for breath. He stood over him, “Or I might volunteer ye to be the next to receive her attentions.”

The acolyte cringed, crawling away but keeping his teacher and the Oracle in sight.

“Not so daft then. Perhaps ye’r learning after all these years.” He walked away, turning his back on the boy.

As Master Bard, Cormac’s duties were to serve as a living anthology for the Order, but his skill set lay particularly with extracting secrets. Mandated to pass along the office to his descendants, his secret, the most prized of all, was that it was all for naught, he had no intention of leaving—ever.

The bard looked at the Oracle still squatting by the body, dipping her fingers in entrails, using the blood as ink to scribe Ogham symbols at equidistant points around the sacrifice. He needed her for now. Her methods were unpleasant, but he would bring people in droves—lambs to the slaughter, willing or no. He would even participate in the eviscerations if it would help clear the murky visions. Frustration bubbled up from his impotence to bring matters to a close. Bound by dictates created by the elders, not his jurisdiction yet, for that he had to rely on this brazen pup.

“If ye are not pleased wi’ the progress,” eyeing the acolyte still crumpled on the ground, “then I suggest ye lift t’ strictures put on her. Interpreting signs would be verra much easier with a group as opposed to only one. There is no’ much she can glean from one.”

The boy sat up and coughed to clear his throat, but his voice was strained still, “It is my appointed task...hu humph...to ascertain...uh, the threat from the authorities before we’re set to move. Humph. I have done that...done that for centuries, uh hmphm.”

“Yes, but by yer own assessment we are no closer to finding the priestess. Perhaps tis not the fault of the Vate’s, but yer own.”

Clearing his throat, he spit, “Do you not remember England? The barn? Careful plans were laid; a false history was planted for the Wickerman’s volunteers. Chalk it all up to zealotry, but it all went to shit—turned into a fucking charnel house!” The boy paced away and then turned. “Do you know or care how difficult it was for me to cover up the remnants of the ritual? The fire did not burn hot enough to turn all evidence to ash, the remains of thirty-three people, contorted in the last throes of death.”

Cormac crossed his arms and leaned against the portico’s upright post. “Ye concocted the plan and built the Wickerman inside that abandoned barn. Did ye no’ think the barn would be engulfed?”

“Do I look stupid? Don’t answer that. You know that I planned for that, but she refused to allow the use of the accelerant.”

“And ye verra well know why. Gasoline raises the temperature of the flame, incinerating the delicacy of the sacrifice. She takes in

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everythin', the time it takes for the sacrifice to be overcome, the height and temperature of the flames, the length of the burn, the weather conditions, the behavior of the surrounding fauna; and all this before readin' the final omen," he pointed to the body, "the results such as those yonder."

"We cannot continue in this fashion for the likes of a seer, no matter her power in divination."

"Twas through her divination we narrowed the search. Before the Wickerman incident we would ha' been better served looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. *We* now ha' a time and a location.

"Granted, but we are fighting two battles. The more sensational the rituals are, the more likely it is that they will garner public attention. The priestess needs to be found quietly. If the entire Order is made aware of her existence in this time we won't be able to get our hands on her. She'll be so heavily guarded with sycophants who have elevated her position to that of messiah. She is just a mere woman."

Cormac nodded. It was true, she was just a woman, but her potential—legendary, thanks to prophecy and augury, a vulnerable woman with the power to topple a god.

"In our efforts to find her quickly and *quietly*, technology—forensic science, has advanced even though your thinking hasn't. All it would take would be one fingerprint, one piece of DNA thoughtlessly left behind to give the authorities a lead they have been champing for to send them directly to us. Wanton actions, such as these, have dire consequences now."

"T'was easy for ye, if I remember correctly, to pass off the charnel house as religious zealotry. A group who in yer words, though I doonae understand the reference, drank their own brand of Kool-Aid, I think it was. Aye?"

"Do your own damned research. In fact, why don't you adapt like the rest of us? Live in the times, perhaps?"

Eyebrow raised, Cormac scoffed, and advanced on his apprentice who sat back on the retaining wall. The boy tried to

cringe back but the bard grabbed his sweatshirt and hoisted him up, "Like ye, I suppose. Go to university; get an education and a measly job, doin' what? Hm? Ye say ye work in guise only, but ye are nothing more than cattle. Settle down, get a wife, impregnate her? The only minutely appealing thing 'tis the ever so brief relief I'd find between some cow's legs. There'll be that in abundance soon. Whate'er I want, I'll take.

"As for diverting the attentions of the authorities, that falls to ye too. And believe me when I tell ye, if necessary, ye will take the fall for this. Let yerself be captured, imprisoned, and put to death if necessary, all to ensure the fruition of our plans."

Scuffling attracted their attention in time to see the Oracle scuttle to the head of her victim as he bumbled the last of his breath, thick with blood. Satisfied, she sat back on her haunches and sniffed the air. Her head turned and the milky eye pierced them, growing wide as if she had just realized they were in attendance.

The creaking of joints echoed in the portico, the Oracle ambled barefoot through the pool of blood unaware, leaving the corpse unattended. Cormac grabbed the acolyte and held fast as she approached, with arms locked outstretched, shackling his offering, a human shield. *Take him. Take him.*

The woman was of small stature, a homunculus, made even smaller by the protruding hump on her back. She jabbed the arrogant boy in the belly, hard enough to make him bend in reflex, then she grabbed his chin and pulled his face close to hers. Fingertips dug in leaving bloody smears on his jaw.

"Impatient, are ye? I ha' a mind to take yer instructor's advice." She clawed at the sweatshirt, pushing it up so his rib cage was exposed. The knife appeared out of the voluminous folds of her cloak, still bloody, and pressed into his flesh. Visibly excited by the welling of blood, she angled the knife and sliced ever so lightly along the rib cage. A thin line of blood followed the blade and the boy hissed through his teeth. "Ye bleed well."

The bard offered, "If t'would help, take him. I ha' other apprentices." He knew full well that she wouldn't, a slave to

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prophecy herself, but the just the idea of silencing the arrogance born of entitlement once and for all gave him some release.

“Ye know better than I th’ I cannot. It has been deemed so where what will, must be. We are no’ to question.” Motioning to Cormac, “However, the lad requires a lesson. Bring him.”

Careful to avoid her bloody footprints, they reached the side of the body. She was the Oracle, but had the vanity of a woman nonetheless. What did one say for this? Cormac settled, “Nicely done,” as he swiftly kicked the back of his novice’s knee, forcing the boy down closer to the body. Keeping a heavy hand on each shoulder, “Teach him what ye will.”

Instead of directing his gaze to the corpse in front of him as Cormac expected her to do, she sat next to the acolyte and shooed his hands off the boy’s shoulders, dismissing him like a schoolboy. He had no choice but to step back and just observe, fuming at her impudence. She was the angel of mercy to the initiates who all but clamored to sacrifice themselves at her hands. She was doting and patient, allowing the acolyte to absorb the information at his own pace. To Cormac, though, she was someone to be feared; the eye, the dead eye, followed him, looking into his soul to extract *his* secrets walled up long ago.

She patted the boy’s hand, “Look around ye, laddie. Tell me what ye see.”

“What? Um...I don’t know. Wall of the house there, roof of the carport overhead...”

“Look deeper,” she interrupted.

“Some household supplies there by the wall, old paint cans, a dented and rusted garbage can, empty, an upturned gasoline canister for a lawnmower, the machine which is just beyond in the high grass, a broken window there, the yellow paint peeling off the wooden ledge—”

“Aye. Tell me more.

“Unpruned trees are overhanging the gravel driveway almost indistinct amongst the infiltrating weeds. No sound of traffic, children, or car doors closing, just the chatter of birds in the trees.”

“What does this tell ye?”

“Um... no one cares for the property?” He looked at her expectantly.

“True, but if ye were payin’ attention, when the initiate was first cut, he made enough noise to scatter those birds, but they didna fly. They remained there, hopping from branch to branch searching out food or minding their eggs, unconcerned about the skelloch here. Can ye learn anything from tha’?”

Looking up at the tree, behind at his teacher, and then back to the woman, “I don’t know.”

“Well, tis only one o’ the signs, the first o’ many. We are in the right land to search for her. If they flew, of course, depending on length of their flight, it would mean that we are searching in the wrong place, time, or even both. But they stayed. The birds’ behavior is not the only factor for this determination, though. Look at the body of the initiate.”

“Ugh.” The skin was peeled back from sternum to groin to reveal the peritoneum, which was cut delicately down the center exposing the bulging intestines, which showed no outward sign of breach.

“What can ye tell me about this?”

“Ugh, the human body reeks.”

She laughed. “Ach, aye. A natural smell.” Sniffing close to him, “Much like body odor is a sign of life; this is a sign of decay. It happens quickly. But this is no’ the answer I want. Look closer. Do ye have the basic knowledge of human anatomy?”

“A little.” Pointing, “Large intestine, small intestine.”

“Tis sufficient. Give me observations.”

He shied away, turning his body as if deciding to deny the corpse’s existence and closed his eyes, but he did as she asked, holding out an arm vaguely gesticulating to observations obviously scarred in his memory. “Um, the large intestine is um, kinda bunched up there towards the top while that length of small intestine is out of its cavity and draped a bit on the ground next to him.”

The Vate griped his outstretched hand and forced it into the pile

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of innards. He violently resisted and Cormac moved to intervene but she motioned him to stay where he was. “Tis more than thirty feet of intestine in the human body and once the sac is pierced that holds the intestines, it usually spills out, but here, it dinna, despite the initiate’s writhing on the ground. Only this small section,” holding it up reverently, “escaped its bonds.”

“What does that mean?”

Cormac could hear the strain in his voice and for a brief moment felt for the kid. He didn’t know if situations were reversed, if he’d be able to keep his stomach down. Better the kid than him. Killing was easy, he relished the power he felt, more each time, but this just seemed a sacrilege, even though it was warranted. Killing slowly, there was only one person he’d love to have the opportunity to see writhe, beg for mercy, of which he’d receive none.

“The birds’ behavior taken into account with this sign, we are close. She will no’ be difficult to track doon now.”

The novice looked back at the body, perplexed, “How did you come to that conclusion?”

“The intestines ha’ stayed inside, indicating that we are in the right geographic location. Mind ye, just taking this into account, it means we are in the same general vicinity. According to distance measures, it could still mean tha’ we are off by several hundred miles yet. But take into account that no other living things, including the birds, were bothered by the disturbance here, indicates further that we are verra close to our conquest.” She felt the limbs of the body. “Good. The stiffening has begun.” She got to her feet using his shoulder. “Come.”

He stood and followed to stand several feet away; his teacher approached to stand at his side.

“Stay here and observe.”

The woman pivoted away and circled the body, chanting low. Cormac couldn’t hear her, and if he read his novice’s face accurately, neither could he. It was intentional on the part of the Oracle. It was the end of her revelations into augury.

She circled the body, trailing over the inscribed Ogham

symbols, and after the second revolution each symbol glowed with white incandescence when she passed. With the completion of her second turn the drying blood that had spilled from the initiate's body glowed, and with the speed of one much younger, the Vate swooped in to take the head between her hands and breathe in the expulsion of trapped air that escaped from the dead man's unmoving mouth. With that last expulsion of gas the body convulsed and grew rigid, heels planted into the ground, back bowed so the head came to rest at a sharp upward angle. She raised her head, eyes glowing with fire, "I ha' found the high priestess."

Chapter 2

Brenawyn McAllister swallowed the bile forcing its way up as she passed the 97th mile marker on the New Jersey turnpike. She slowed to let the tractor-trailer block her view of the mangled guardrail, but nothing stopped the surfacing images of the Jeep, a grotesquely twisted, blackened husk once representing a life. Liam's.

A slave to the demands of routine, her eyes were riveted to the rearview mirror's reflection before the truck had cleared it. This was the last time she would pass here, and she needed to see one last time. The tattered tails of a faded yellow ribbon tied to the rusted metal, a ribbon that she had tied there, snapped taut as the truck passed; a beacon screaming "traitor."

It was three fucking years ago.

It was yesterday.

To learn about the accident through empty platitudes, and later through the report that mocked her in its factual clarity. It gave her no release, no closure.

Breathe.

Her nightmares were enough. Living here, passing here every day was too much to bear. She had to get out or die alone.

Brenawyn watched the sunset from the George Washington Bridge, the beginning of twenty-nine mile bumper-to-bumper traffic

with no surcease. By the time she crawled over the Connecticut border she itched for only a moment's reprieve away from her torture device to stretch her stiff back and cramped legs. The Challenger with manual transmission was one of her few splurges, but the pleasure of driving it was lost in the hours spent crawling along I-95.

The mile and half mile marker signs for the Darian rest stop taunted her. She could see it in the distance with its Golden Arches lit, as if from an ocean away. An hour later she finally pulled into the only available spot in the parking lot. The vibrations of shifting gears woke Spencer and he jumped up and danced around the front seat. Brenawyn could barely hook the leash onto his collar.

"Hold still, dog. Oww! Stop stepping on me. Ouch! Remind me to get your nails trimmed."

Spencer licked her face, and whined. "All right, I know. Five hours is a long time to be stuck in the car. I know. I have been stuck in here too. I couldn't help it though." Throwing a glance back at the congested highway, "People who can't drive should stay home."

Yanked by her dog the second the car door opened, she swore that she'd leash train him yet, no matter how long it took. Tongue lolling out the side of his mouth, he pranced in circles around her, bumping her legs and stepping on her toes. Adjusting her hold on his lead, Brenawyn led him to the scalped grass.

Here she let out the retractable leash enough to allow him to sniff everything within a five foot range. She glanced around, her father's voice in her head—*always be aware of your surroundings, Bren*—and saw the odd shadows the cars cast in the poorly lit lot. Faceless silhouettes moved on a mission to and from the building. Music thumped from an open car door somewhere nearby; she could feel the bass in the soles of her feet. No one looked threatening. No one looked friendly either.

"Okay, time to go, Spence." Turning around, she dragged the dog back to the car, opened the door and struggled to get him in. The dog whined. "Just hush. I'll be right back."

She opened the restroom door and a fetid odor hit her. Lazy

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gnats buzzed low over the stagnant water pooled beneath the sinks and around the toilets. She hesitated for a moment considering her less than adequate foot attire. Why did she have to drink the whole extra-large coffee in the car? It left her no choice but to brave the bathroom. “God, I hope that’s water,” she prayed as she navigated around the larger pools. She inspected the stalls—no paper, no paper, not flushed, no paper, God knows what on the seat, and no paper. Rooting around in her purse, Brenawyn excavated the last two tissues from the plastic sleeve. If only she had replaced them with a new pack before she left, though two were better than nothing. Choosing the first stall with no paper, Brenawyn closed herself within the small space.

The adjacent stall’s hinges squeaked as she turned to flush the toilet with her foot. Hands braced on either side for balance, Brenawyn glimpsed an arthritic hand reaching under the stall wall. “I’m sorry there is no extra paper in here. I had to use a tissue myself.” But there was no other response than the hand withdrawing.

Brenawyn jumped and dropped her purse when a screech bellowed out from the adjacent stall. She knocked on the stall wall, concerned, but as she bent to retrieve her fallen bag, the gnarled hand darted under the wall again to clamp onto her ankle. Heart pounding, she pivoted and wrenched herself loose from the bony claw’s vice-like grip.

The shrieking continued and the claw found her again. Shit, this was just the sort of thing her father had warned her about. She pulled the handle. The door didn’t budge. Panicked, she yanked on it. Nothing. The latch. Undo the latch first. Brenawyn stomped on the wrist, feeling a wet pop reverberate through the sole of her shoe.

She flung the door open and dashed out, *I fall, I’m dead*. Flip flops slipping and squeaking across the floor, she lost one along the way. She left it. She crashed into the door and pitched herself into the arms of an unsuspecting man walking into the shared restroom vestibule. “Are ye hurt, lass?”

Dazed, Brenawyn clutched the wall of muscle, finding brief

comfort, and she looked up into bright blue eyes, but she had to get away. "Sorry. Don't go in there."

The safety of the car beckoned in the distance; Spencer was barking and clawing at the window. She threw her bag on the hood and frantically searched for her keys, dumping half the contents before finding them. She fumbled, her fingers stiff and awkward, before finally grabbing the keyless remote. Pressing both the unlock and panic buttons, she scooped up her purse, whisked the wallet, passport, and other junk strewn across the hood into the bag and threw herself into the car, jabbing the buttons over and over again long after the first contact locked the doors. Spencer stood over her lap hunched low, growling out the window.

The panic alarm screamed. No one in the packed lot paid attention. Finally finding the right button, she disengaged the alarm before she jammed the key into the ignition, started the car and revved the engine. Wrestling the dog to the passenger seat, she didn't see the woman approach. Her head whipped to attention, eyes locked with the old hag as the car rocked from the impact of the woman's fists on the hood of the car.

"Shit." Brenawyn threw the gearshift in reverse without looking and careened out of the parking space, the smell of burnt rubber filling her nose. Spencer rushed into the backseat and growled at the woman.

Brenawyn craned her neck to get another look, but the woman was gone. A car horn blared and she slammed on her brakes seconds before plowing into the hag. She ripped through the gears as she threw the car into first. Twisting her neck to judge the distance, "What the fuck is going on?" Three hundred or more feet between the car and the parking space—no one could move that fast.

The old woman stood in the middle of the bypass road cradling her arm, ignoring horns and screeching brakes. The woman raised her arms, the left wrist hanging at an impossible angle. Eyes glowing with red incandescence met Brenawyn's stare.

"Oh, hell no!" She popped the clutch and whipped the wheel to swerve around the woman.

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The line of cars waiting for their chance to sit in traffic materialized beyond the building, but Brenawyn leaned on the horn and took the shoulder. Gravel hit the undercarriage like machine gun fire, as she flew past the stopped cars at breakneck speed.

~ ~ ~

The car roared to life as she approached, and she could see by the quick punctuated movements of Cormac's shadowed figure that he was angry. She slid onto the passenger seat as quick as her joints would allow and was greeted by tension rolling off of the impertinent Bard. He stared ahead, slamming his hands against the steering wheel three times before throwing the gearshift in reverse.

She put her hand on his arm. "Och, let her go," she asserted.

He pivoted in his seat to face her, shaking his head, "What?"

"We need ta think and organize in light o' this new development. Go ta the hotel. I need ta consult the prophecies."

"But—"

She interrupted, "Ye will respect me, child. Doonae think I forgot that ye were willing to give up yer apprentice so easily." She scrutinized him sitting there, knowing he needed to be reminded of his place. "I wonder what kind of picture ye would paint for me with yer own blood."

He lowered his eyes, shrinking away from her in the confines of the car. She leaned toward him and whispered, "There is no prophecy concerning ye, and if 'tis required of him to be the scapegoat, perhaps it falls to ye to become my *next* volunteer."

He drew back further, disjointedly, until his head made a satisfying clunk against the closed window. It took a moment longer, too long for her tastes, for the fight to go out of his frame. Perhaps the time was coming to show him his place.

"Call in the Shaman," she demanded.

"I doonae like him."

"Yer opinion wasna asked. Call him."

"He's irrevocably set in his ways."

"Yes, and we will use tha'. The priestess needs to be found and

we ken who she is." She looked out at the parking lot, contemplating her next words before continuing. "We are no' the only ones looking for her."

"Aye, but if he learns of our plans?"

"How much ye disclose is yer decision. Ye seem not to trust him, but yer reasoning holds verra little interest ta me. Tell him enough ta find who is responsible for dropping the veil."

"We doonae need Sinclair."

She disregarded his obstinacy. "He'll be compelled ta take up the mantle and destroy whoever stands in the way. Once she is found, Cerunnos will call the Shaman back to the Stalking Grounds, making him impotent to interfere with our plans."

"There is no way for him to escape once there?"

The Oracle sighed. "Even if there was, he has no soul thanks to yer acolyte's puttock. She made sure to destroy the reliquary. He only exists through his connection ta the Wild Hunt; but he is the shaman. He will be released on th' four days o' adoration when his participation is required, but then be at the mercy of the Wild Hunt for rest o' the wheel o' time."

"Those four days are enough to disrupt my—our designs." Cormac protested.

"Patience, my child. Only until Saimhain will we be vulnerable."